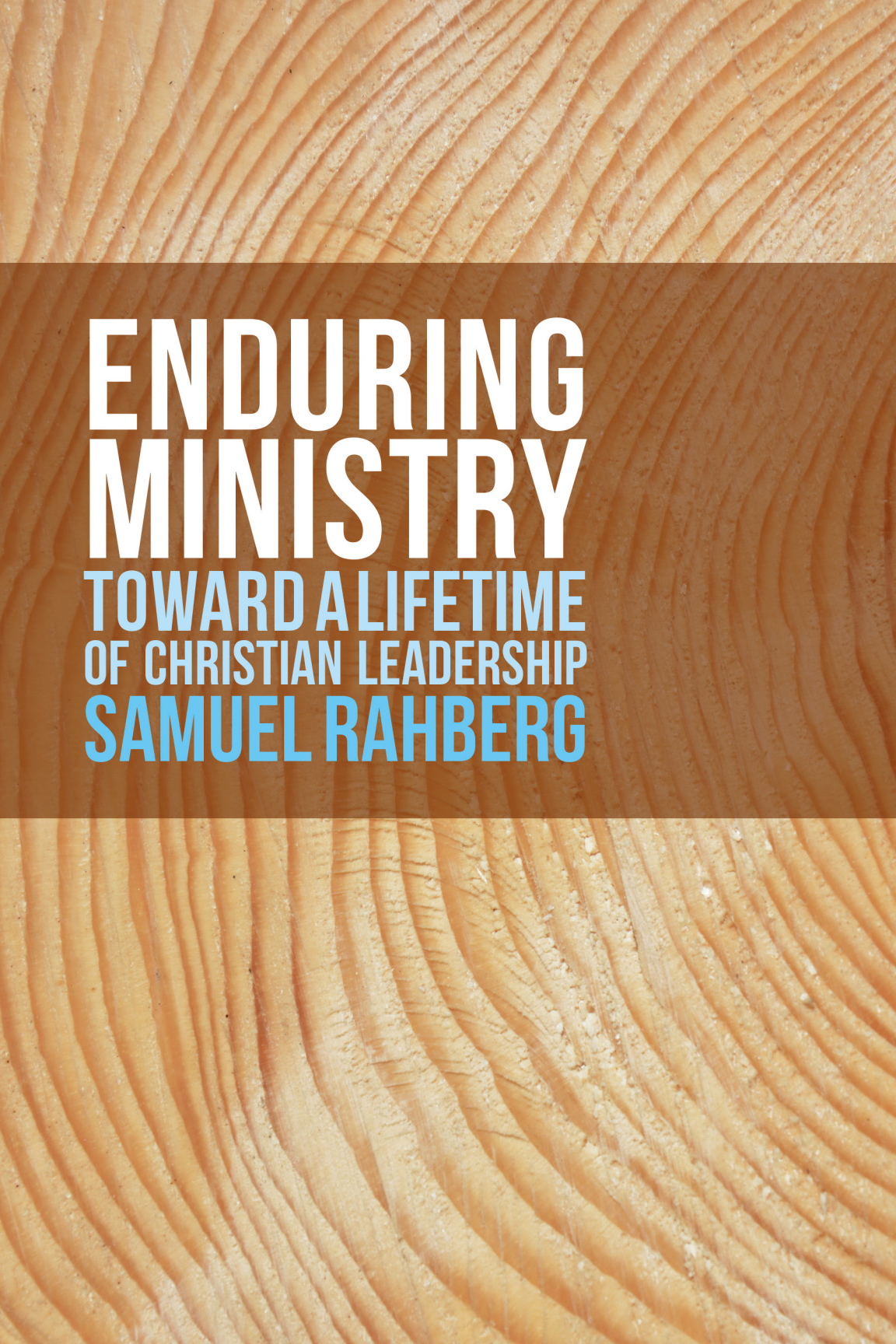
ENDURING
MINISTRY
TOWARD A LIFETIME
OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
SAMUEL RAHBERG

VISIT…

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"The shifting landscape has never been more challenging for Christian leaders. As such, for those of us called to this ministry, it is critical that we are intentional about being soulfully grounded. Sam Rahberg's *Enduring Ministry* provides an elegant and thought-provoking invitation to go deeper into who God is calling us to be. This is a resource I will not only continue to use for personal reflection, but will widely share with those I am called to walk with as they discern and form how to use their gifts for God's mission."

—The Rt. Rev. Brian N. Prior, IX Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Minnesota

"Gracefully blending leadership and ministerial experience, spiritual direction, and the fruits of being attentive to one's own growth and spiritual journey, Rahberg's *Enduring Ministry* is a valuable resource for any 'who wish to live faithfully and well towards a ministry that endures.' This book will have broad appeal not only to those in active Christian ministry, but also all who work with or accompany those called to this service. Anyone who has struggled at times to remain faithful to or energized by their call to serve others will find in Rahberg a wise and understanding companion willing to share his own challenges in finding life and joy through continuing commitment to an enduring ministry of Christian service."

—Michael Sirany, teacher and superviser
Sacred Ground Center for Spirituality, Saint Paul, Minnesota

"In *Enduring Ministry*, Samuel Rahberg claims that ministry endures when it is grounded in lived experience and enriched by God's Word, theological wisdom, and institutional commitments. What he offers is a perspective that helps us navigate the risks and rewards of one's life calling in a spirit of reflective fidelity."

—Carol Rennie, OSB, Spiritual Director
Benedictine Center, St. Paul's Monastery, St. Paul, Minnesota

"Sam Rahberg's *Enduring Ministry* offers a guide for discerning your transitions. He's a practitioner that has been seasoned through experience and tradition. This book is bold and brave. For a long, lingering, look at the 'worth it' of ministry this book is timely and true to today's changing culture of Church."

—Mary Margaret Funk, OSB
Our Lady of Grace Monastery, Beech Grove, Indiana

"Here at the intersection of truth-telling, the ministerial life, tradition, and a naïve response to the vocational call, this book incorporates the complexity and challenges that church leaders face. Passage through a lifetime of ministry is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, or an endurance as the author describes to be aware of one's progress. Through years of practice, listening, and spiritual direction, Sam Rahberg interprets his experience, and does what one rarely will in leadership; he admonishes church leaders when they are feeling vulnerable and unable to grasp effective strategies for renewal to watch once again for the presence of God and renew their vocational call and spiritual practices. Drawing on the Benedictine charisms, these chapters offer the gift of new perspectives to the rigors of a ministerial life and the means to cultivate the seeds of hope that might keep one from disappearing from the ranks of Church leadership."

—Barbara Sutton, Director Field Education and Ministerial Formation
Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota

"Ministry can be exhilarating, beautiful, and life-fulfilling. But it can also be heartbreaking and exhausting, and it demands from the best of us a stamina and resilience we often struggle to maintain. I'm so grateful for Sam Rahberg's gracious, practical, and deeply honest book which offers an elegant, humane, and sustainable approach to the challenge of lifelong vocation. If someone had put a copy of *Enduring Ministry* in my hands twenty years ago my ministry would have looked very different. I wish they had."

—Chris Webb, OSB, Deputy Warden of Launde Abbey and author of *The Fire of the Word*

"Invitingly authentic. The leader is immediately invited into a reflective process through imagery, Scripture, poetry, and story as Sam's authentic and wise voice is experienced in his writing. The realities of Christian public leadership are explored through discerning questions and practices, which invite the readers to listen to their hearts and minds as they faithfully reflect on how they lead."

—Sr. Noreen Stevens
Assistant to the Bishop for Leadership Support
Saint Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Enduring Ministry

Toward a Lifetime of Christian Leadership

Samuel D. Rahberg

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For my parents,
who introduced me to the practice of ministry.

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Foreword

Leadership in Christian ministry has never been an easy calling. From the very start of the Christian community, life gathered around the Risen Lord seldom followed a straight, harmonious pattern. Some of the apostle Paul's best writing were his instructions about how people were to behave as they followed the new Way. Take, for instance, the brilliant passage where Paul lays out a vision of Christian life breathtaking in its magnanimity (Rom 12:9-18). One suspects, however, that it was an exhortation and not necessarily what Paul found at work among the Christians of Rome:

> Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have the same regard for one another. . . . If possible, on your part, live at peace with all.

In other writings attributed to Paul, there is no vagueness about his purpose. Listen up, friends; what you are doing is a contradiction to the Gospel (e.g. 1 Corinthians).

This all acknowledges that pastoral leadership is demanding and often exhausting. In my years of working with church ministers and facilitating staff development events, I have been amazed at the depth of commitment so many have to their work. But I carry as well anecdotes about acts of ruthlessness, lack of charity, mutual neglect, and anger that confront the power of theology to overcome the inclinations of human nature. All communities are,

after all, made up of human beings. Being a disciple of Christ does matter, but it charges people with the hard work of learning to live together in peace.

Into this swirl of reality where the good, the bad, and the ugly are always in play, comes this timely book by Sam Rahberg. Its title is a bit enigmatic in that one could receive it in two different ways. For some the arrival of this book might signal a lifeline in the midst of ministerial service where one feels discouraged, unsettled, and even adrift from one's vocational moorings. In this sense, some might be looking for how to bear up, to literally endure situations that feel less and less life-giving. *Enduring Ministry*, however, is not designed for this audience. Theirs are worthy needs, but for Rahberg the focus is on the other sense of endurance—the ability of the Christian vision underlying leadership to last, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. This book, generated directly from Rahberg's own ministerial experience, demonstrates the power of ministerial reflection. Leaders can go about their tasks without taking time for reflection, but my observations are that over time their ministries hollow out. The work becomes just labor—creative, important, necessary—but it teaches nothing to the ministers themselves. That is where the unraveling of ministry begins and the sense of toughing it out emerges.

At the heart of *Enduring Ministry* is Rahberg's core argument that the capacity to sustain oneself across the tumult and chaos of ministerial life resides primarily in the decisions individual ministers makes about how to live and lead. Put more succinctly, if the zeal of ministry is to endure, "manage thyself." Rahberg is not offering one more self-help scheme, a set of steps that lead to happiness. Nor is he unmindful of the wellspring of grace that enlivens all human effort. Rather, his is an invitation to the challenge of being attentive to one's own inner life so that the issues we all carry as a result of the families into which we have been born and the developmental experiences we have accrued do not go unexamined. "Managing oneself" means, practically, that pastoral leaders are not working out on others what they should be addressing themselves. Whether taking this initiative happens in spiritual direction, therapy, ministry support groups, or journaling, the minister is alert to ways she or

he can achieve a measure of freedom, enlightened by their past but not its prisoner.

My experience, once again, is that the most effective (and most satisfied) ministers I know have all pursued ways to manage themselves so that they avoid being taken hostage by the host of often unavoidable circumstances arising in the course of leading. Ministers who hoard anger, re-open again and again the wounds of disappointment, tolerate intolerable working conditions, or work night and day to blot out their feelings of oppression all in the end finally die. Their bodies go on, but their hearts are broken.

While *Enduring Ministry* does not offer a quick fix, it does offer a structured discipline for reorienting how one will lead in ministry. It begins (and ends) with being clear about the vision one holds. Without vision and a compelling mission, it is tempting to chase activity to the detriment of contemplation. The process of reflection that the author lays out honors the importance of the questions to which we need to attend just as we need to be purposeful about the stories that frame and interpret our experience. This is not a text calling for a new level of heroism, especially the sort where ministers allow themselves to be swallowed up by expectations of perfection—either of themselves or of the institutions they serve. Managing oneself means knowing oneself—one's gifts and limitations. Gaining such self-knowledge is, as Rahberg argues, central to the work of growing and deepening as a minister. It cannot be relegated to the rare gaps in busyness when a person tries to take stock. Rahberg's own reading of the Benedictine tradition grounds his conviction that paying attention, being purposeful, and embracing a lifetime of discernment opens the minister—the disciple of Christ—to an expansion of heart, mind, and soul. It is in that new space that the minister discovers new possibilities for her or his leadership, finds the courage to make choices that lead towards the light, and rediscovers the transformative power of one's vocational call.

Pastoral ministers provide indispensable leadership to individuals and communities seeking to be faithful to an inspired vision of God's action in the world. It is indeed demanding work, and stories abound of its shadow side where leaders simply end up plowing through the misery. But *Enduring Ministry* tells a different story in

the generous sharing of the author's own experience and spiritual practice. This book and the process it provides signal the promise of a new beginning. Managing oneself is as challenging as leading a fractious community. The hope is in beginning, taking the steps, and living into a discipline whose fruits are so brilliantly described in a blessing by the Irish writer, John O'Donohue:

> Awaken your spirit to adventure;
> Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;
> Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,
> For your soul senses the world that awaits you.[1]

Victor Klimoski
Former Director of Lifelong Learning
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[1] "For A New Beginning" by John O'Donohue in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 14. Used by permission.

Preface

When people in ministry get weary, disillusioned or frustrated—as is bound to happen from time to time—it is tempting to swallow hard and bully on. Seldom, over the long run, does that end well or with joy. Eventually Christian leaders and those they serve both suffer. Sometimes ministers kick the dust from their sandals and go in search of greener pastures and, at times, this may indeed be the best option. But what if ministers remain unclear about whether to stay or go, or are leaning toward staying but desperate to reclaim a more wholehearted approach? This book is designed for those who seek a more durable way forward, one that is infused with grace and inspired by good mission. Chapter by chapter we will attend to the shift from merely enduring to lasting and effective Christian leadership.

One early example for us to consider is Benedict of Nursia (480–543 AD), a Christian leader of world renown, whose first experience of ministry in community was less than ideal. As Gregory the Great (540–604 AD) tells the story, a group of men sought out the hermit Benedict in a cave near Subiaco. The men wanted Benedict to become their abbot, but he refused almost as long as they persisted. Soon the new abbot's rule of life proved too stringent for the fledgling community and the men attempted to poison Benedict, first through wine, then through bread. Miraculously, according to Gregory, Benedict blessed the chalice and it broke; he blessed the bread and a raven carried it away. Benedict escaped this first experience of community and went on to inspire a legacy of monastic life that has endured for over fifteen hundred years.

Even without personal experience of near-death leadership, this story should pique a sense of curiosity and solidarity in Christian leaders. The dramatic episodes that are told to help us understand

Benedict's vocational discernment remind us that we are not the first to face challenges in ministry and questions about our calling. In his narrative, Gregory stressed that Benedict responded to the broken chalice with full composure—"with a calm face and a tranquil mind," according to the translation by Terrence Kardong.[1] What a gift it would be if Christian leaders could turn toward the challenges and questions we face with that kind of composure. Unfortunately, many of us are more accustomed to variations of anger and sadness, two sensations that are sure to cloud judgment and to make discernment more difficult. I want this book to invite a lessening of our anger, an easing of our sadness, and a renewing of our composure. Such steep outcomes will be entrusted to the grace of God, but I do hope that this sense of invitation engages those who read these pages.

My own story of evolving vocation may sound familiar to other Christian leaders. When I was in my late twenties, I left a lovely little parish in St. Paul, Minnesota. I appreciated the people and a great deal about the community's expression of life together, but after five years of working with lifespan Christian education, I was tired and discouraged by our apparent inability to move forward. I resigned my position and shortly thereafter began serving a Benedictine spirituality center. Now, after twelve years in retreat ministry, I have felt the old waves of disappointment washing over me again. Possibilities seem dampened by realities and I have lost steam. In naming these realities, I mean to place no blame on either community I have served. Rather, I am trying to voice my commitment to keep learning about myself as the common denominator and to offer some of what I am learning for the benefit of others.

I have chosen to remain in my current position. More precisely, I have chosen to stay over and over again, usually taking small bites of six months to a year at a time. I do so because I want to grow into the next thirty years of Christian leadership, contributing my

[1] Terrence G. Kardong, *The Life of St. Benedict by Gregory the Great: Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 22. For an interesting biographical connection to Gregory's own struggle to maintain spiritual composure in the papacy, see 27–28.

best gifts to whatever work is before me. I believe it is important for me to face the patterns underlying my disappointments so that I might become less distracted from my calling. God is here and now, inviting me into more mature forms of leadership. If and when the time comes for me to make a transition, I will depart knowing I have served faithfully and gained a degree of wellness and freedom that I did not quite enjoy when I first left the parish. Decades of ministry lie ahead of me and this important work of formation will enable me to serve in more fulfilling ways than a string of posts that unfold predictably from vigor to burnout to walking away.

My struggle is not unique. Countless hours of spiritual direction and conversation with other Christian leaders tell me that there is a crisis of personal agency in the world of ministry today. Faithful women and men are struggling through a loss of vision and grounding that is negatively impacting their clarity of calling and their courage to respond to the needs they see. I am one among many who are sensing an invitation to turn and face our difficulties today in hopes of welcoming a different tomorrow. I believe that God desires us to cultivate enduring ministries and to experience joy and completeness—even within brokenness—along the way. For me, that journey begins by sharpening the attributes and practices that most help me plant my feet on solid, Christ-centered ground.

A number of influences shape my growth as a Christian leader, including Scripture, liturgy, the Rule of St. Benedict and its commentators, mentors who have formed me for professional ministry, and the faithful women and men with whom I journey as a spiritual director. I have stayed the course of ministry this long because I have also benefited from conversations with strong colleagues, spiritual directors, and some therapists. Let me commend something similar to you at the outset of this reading: surround yourself with good people.

One of the greatest dangers to our being centered is the slow and painful drift toward isolation. When the voices of resistance are the loudest ones in our lives—whether they come from within us or from outside—they become a dirge that weakens our sense of being gifted and called at our core. We hear a voice in this saying, "Maybe I am not the right person for this position, not clever enough, or

do not have a handle on the vision after all." When that message seems to come from authority structures both above us and below us, the combined pressure can drive us to fragmentation and retreat. Keep nurturing relationships of support and trust. Find or renew your relationship with a spiritual director, mentor, therapist, coach, ally, supervisor, praying community, or combination of the above. Assemble a group of advisors formally or informally, and establish standing coffee dates with people of wisdom. Whatever connectedness looks like in your life, the purpose is the same: surround yourself with people who embody the grace of God, helping you break down the walls of isolation and helping you keep the indispensable questions about giftedness and calling in the light of day.

It is my hope that in writing this book, fewer women and men leave ministry in anger or defeat and that more Christian leaders will find an inner spaciousness that allows for better discernment. That requires us holding a creative tension between the real challenges of ministry and the spiritual life that undergirds it. It means making the commitment daily to participate in the mission of God without surrendering hope and faithfulness to the all-too-common anxieties and frustrations of life in community. In that respect, every word that follows applies to all the baptized. Whatever your unique calling, whether in a secular or religious context, you share the Gospel's call to discipleship that leads to service.

Every Christian experiences the joys, the frustrations, and the hunger for renewal that accompany service. Not everyone has been called to lay or ordained ministry in parishes or nonprofits, but we are each called to integration and the search for ways to stay engaged with what we believe God is calling us to do in this particular place, at this particular time. In these pages I cannot help but use the language of "ministry" because it is a theme that is so often in my ears and on the tip of my tongue. Daily I encounter stories about ministry from individuals across the lifespan and serving in diverse settings. Here I will speak primarily to "Christian leaders" from my vantage point as a person trained for parish ministry and exercising leadership within a religious setting, but I write with the intention that my emphases will also resonate for others.

Readers will come to this text with different needs and hungers, and each will find their own way to make use of what follows. The

first matter is one of pace. Some may scan quickly for themes and language that help them get a feel for the big picture, while others may prefer to move slowly and steadily along. There are questions available at the end of each chapter so that those who wish to linger and reflect might do so. If anything strikes a chord in you, pause to give some room for the insight to breathe. There is also a matter of focus. The first chapter about the renewal of vision will be of interest to Christian leaders in any season of ministry. From there, some may benefit from a more targeted reading. Those who are feeling worn thin by the intensity of their circumstances and relationships will likely find the first section, Grounded in the Moment, most helpful in their practical approach to situational difficulties. Those chapters may be enough to consider when one is really struggling. Later chapters will appeal to those who have caught a second wind and are eager to chart a new course. The reader for whom the day-to-day aspects of leadership are modestly well in hand might turn to the second section or the third. Those feeling energized about the process of synthesizing and applying what they are learning to Christian leadership may find section two, Perched in Conversation, of primary interest, while those wrestling with the complexities of loss and ambiguity may wish to turn directly to section three, Soaring in the Midst of Ambiguity. However you choose to approach this text, I encourage you to do so as a point of conversation with other supportive people.

One final note about the reading. Lest I seem to have suggested in any way that enduring ministry is primarily about Christian leaders finding their own willpower to stand up, dust themselves off, and move on, let me reinforce what I hope infuses every charge along the way: We serve at the invitation and by the power of Christ who dwells within us. It is by the grace of God that any minister or ministry endures.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What are you bringing to this text?
2. What do you seek?

Acknowledgments

The spiritual discipline of helping ideas take shape on a page is undergirded by the contributions of many people. Among them all, I am most deeply touched by my wife and children, who came often to my writing desk bearing hugs and smiles. I am also grateful to the staff of Liturgical Press for choosing to support a publication like this for the sake of Christian leaders and the church. Their affirmation and guidance have been enlivening.

Faithful conversation partners like Sr. Eleanor Wartman, OSB, Michael Sirany, James Michel, Steven Arnold, Peter Watkins, and Linzy Martin have helped me sharpen my thinking, as have others who have joined me for retreats and workshops. The insights that these conversations yielded have been tested and refined in collaboration with the Sisters and staff of St. Paul's Monastery, generally, and the Benedictine Center, specifically: Sisters Carol Rennie, Virginia Matter, Benita Gerold, Sharon Schiller, and Susan Bourauel, as well as Chris Folkenson, Nancy Vaccaro, and Kelly Czajka.

Few recent experiences have helped me better interpret my role as a Christian leader than being involved in the *Conversatio* lifelong learning program of Saint John's School of Theology • Seminary, Collegeville and participating in Foundations of Christian Leadership, sponsored by Leadership Education at Duke Divinity, Durham. I am grateful to both of these institutions for helping leaders like me reflect upon Christ-centered ministry.

I continue to treasure the Spirit's mysterious work in the lives of women and men with whom I journey as a spiritual director. Being entrusted with their stories and invited to experience God's presence at their side is among the greatest privileges of ministry I can imagine. Where I have shared elements of their stories that emerged in spiritual direction, I have done so with permission.

Finally, over the last decade one man has held me to the fire of my own convictions like no other. By his encouragement, candor, and wit, Victor Klimoski has helped me strengthen my sense of calling and clarity. The fruits of his enduring friendship can be harvested from these pages.

1

Vision

Move toward Clarity

One crisp fall day high above an untamed shoreline, I hiked with my family through a beautiful forest of changing trees along the edge of a ragged cliff. Without so much as a sound, an enormous bird eclipsed the sky directly above us, moving its shadow slowly and smoothly from the woods toward the water. Unlike gulls that toss and turkey vultures that wobble, this golden eagle, breathtaking in its deep brown body, gilded nape, and wingspan of over six feet, glided without the slightest tremble until it reached the cliff. There, no more than a stone's throw away, the eagle seemed to pause in mid-air, a massive, powerful creature floating in place on unseen currents. She captivated me.

I have come to believe that what enchants us about encounters like these is the clear intersection of being and purpose. The eagle cannot be other than it truly is. Its behaviors appear natural and fitting within its own environment, demonstrating a genuine comfort with what it was made to be. It is our own capacity for authenticity, clarity of identity, and purpose, our own desire to be most fully who we truly are, that resonates so strongly with sights like these in nature. That is why everyone has stories about a sunset, landscape, wild critter, or gentle breeze that broke into a moment and awakened a new sense of clarity. We carry these images with us because they remind us that it is indeed natural for being and purpose to meet.

In contrast to the energy and assurance such images inspire, it is a lack of clarity about our being and purpose that most harms

our joy and readiness for Christian leadership. One author writes that "underlying all of the causes of burnout is a perception that something is *lacking*, which produces frustration and hinders us from taking action."[1] This observation suggests that burnout is not primarily about exhaustion from working too hard; it is about the weariness that comes from a loss of vision. Whether it be a personal or communal vision that seems to be missing something or to have become muddled, the results are the same. Random efforts and activities, especially ones that persist over time, eventually increase our fragmentation and sap our energy. If that is true, then one of the most important responsibilities for a leader is to bring people together in ways that steward the vision. Leaders must hold up questions that help communities attend to the unique calling of God to these people in this place at this time, and yet the capacity to help shepherd a shared vision must begin at a more personal level.

All Christian leaders yearn for the renewal of their own vision and strength within the context of ministry. If we are to sustain a lifetime in leadership, we must embrace the central and recurring challenge of reclaiming and refining an orientation that infuses our leadership with direction and meaning. That is no easy or short-term endeavor, especially when the demands of everyday ministry create a drift toward ever greater complexity and ambiguity. As an ongoing act of discipleship, we continue to submit to the discovery of who we are in Christ and how we are being called to contribute to God's mission in the world. Individuals and communities alike move toward that kind of clarity in organic, often indirect ways. Sometimes it is a stirring encounter with an eagle that can open our eyes.

Throughout history, human beings have longed to soar and today's Christian leaders are no different. In this chapter, at the outset of our exploration about enduring ministry, we will take a fresh look at an ancient symbol. We will first consider the eagle, which generations have admired for its strengths and its weaknesses, drawing some parallels to modern ministry along the way. We will also set the stage for the chapters to follow, considering the eagle to be an archetype for the exercise of Christian leadership and an ambassador who extends to us God's promise to renew our vision and strength.

The Eagle as Timeless Symbol

The eagle has been a political and philosophical symbol for centuries. It became the national emblem of the United States in 1782 and still appears on the official seal of the federal government. Chosen to signify strength and liberty, the image of the eagle continues to arouse a popular sense of independence, patriotism, and freedom, and yet citizens of the United States cannot claim to be unique in their appreciation of the eagle. Countries from Albania to Zambia, along with countless family crests, use some species of eagle as a central symbol. This reflects what philosophers and theologians throughout history have always known: that this mysterious creature captivates the human imagination. A brief survey of some of the key elements in their writing will help us understand more clearly the fascination that has developed over time.

The eagle appears often in Greek mythology, especially as a companion to Zeus, and it is Aristotle, writing in *The History of Animals* in 350 BC, who points to a unique attribute prized by the ancient world: the eagle was thought capable of looking directly into the sun. So essential was this power that eagles were thought to rear their young according to this standard. Aristotle writes, "The sea-eagle is very quick-sighted, and compels its young to gaze on the sun before they are feathered. If any one of them refuse, it is beaten and turned round: and the one of them which first weeps when gazing on the sun is killed, the other is reared."[2] About four centuries later and in his own *Natural History*, the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) echoes Aristotle's assertion that eagles force their young to look into the rays of the sun, but he also adds other elements that contributed to the eagle legends: "[Eagles] meet their end not from old age nor sickness but from hunger, as their upper mandible grows to such a size that it is too hooked for them to be able to open it."[3]

Suggestions like these built up the mystique around eagles, and not without a biblical twinge. Following Pliny the Elder, the fascination with eagles continued to swell. By the ninth century, teachers like Hrabanus Maurus (780–856 AD), a Benedictine abbot and archbishop of Mainz, were compiling encyclopedias as handbooks for Christian preaching. Hrabanus observes that the eagle

suggests God's "holy people," who with sharp sight are "lifted up to the teaching of God" and "nourished by the hope of heavenly things."[4] References from Scripture like Psalm 103:5, "your youth is renewed like the eagle's," may have inspired other stories about the eagle's power for resurrection. Guillaume le Clerc (a thirteenth century cleric, likely from northern France) perpetuates the ideal of looking directly into the sun and refines the legends about the eagle's rejuvenation:

> When it is old it becomes young again in a very strange manner. When its eyes are darkened and its wings are heavy with age, it seeks out a fountain clear and pure, where the water bubbles up and shines in the clear sunlight. Above this fountain it rises high up into the air, and fixes its eyes upon the light of the sun and gazes upon it until the heat thereof sets on fire its eyes and wings. Then it descends down into the fountain where the water is clearest and brightest, and plunges and bathes three times, until it is fresh and renewed and healed of its old age.[5]

Drawing on these and other writers, a modern scholar offers a composite explanation of the eagle metaphor to make even more explicit the theological implications as understood by Medieval Christians:

> As the eagle renews its youth, so too can the man with "old clothes and dim eyes", who should seek the spiritual spring and raise the eyes of his mind to God. The rock on which the eagle sharpens its beak is Christ, on which man can sharpen his soul; the eagle also represents Christ, who came from heaven to catch souls, just as the eagle catches fish. The eagle's ability to look directly at the sun represents Christ's ability to look directly at God, and as the eagle lifts its young to the sun, so do angels lift worthy souls to God.[6]

Looking at a mere handful of writers spanning thousands of years, we cannot mistake the connections that developed between the image of the eagle and visions for the Christian life. Even these few stories help us appreciate the inspirations within our tradition that led to so many artistic renderings of eagles in sculptures, paint-

ings, and mosaics near baptismal fonts. For Christian leaders the symbol is worth unpacking even further. Some interesting parallels come into view with help from the modern study of eagles.

Eagle Strengths

The eagle's strengths are many, but three—its eyes, wings, and talons—are truly extraordinary. They represent aspects of its nature that relate directly to matters of its survival. The eagle must be able to see, fly, and hunt if it is to endure in the wild. As we watch an eagle live into its own existence, we cannot help being amazed and inspired. The strengths of the eagle can encourage us to see Christian leadership at its best.

First, eagles have remarkable two-way vision. Studies have shown that eagles possess a sense of sight so strong that they are able to clearly identify their prey at a distance of well over two miles. That is not just picking up the movement of a rabbit or noticing a small blurred ball. Miles away, eagles see a rabbit's nose twitch. To take advantage of that kind of vision, eagles must choose their point of perspective carefully. Very often they glide high above and watch open ground or water, but when they use a stationary perch, they choose one with a long and clear view. Leaders in ministry must seek out opportunities that enable them to look ahead, far beyond what is right under our own twitching noses. At the same time, we cannot lose track of those with whom we journey. With two focal points and an astonishing 180-degree field of vision, eagles see simultaneously what is beside them and in front of them. This suggests to us that awareness of who and what is around us is just as indispensable as looking far ahead.

Second, the enormous wings of an eagle enable their broad frames to take flight. Even at mature weights of ten to sixteen pounds, they can fly at speeds of up to thirty miles per hour. However, they do not always move under their own power. As we saw at the outset of this chapter, an eagle's wide wingspan makes them capable of riding invisible air currents, whether it be a wind that pushes upward after hitting a geological structure like the cliff, or a thermal that circulates in the open air and carries the eagle higher and higher. The hunt requires even more. When eagles extend their

wings and harness the energy of gravity and wind, they can dive at over one hundred miles per hour. Likewise, Christian leaders may be able to fly at impressive speeds alone and they might gracefully ride momentum by themselves, but the execution of a good mission requires something more. When the time for action comes, we need one another and the exceptional gifts each person brings.

Lastly, an eagle's talons are evidence that they are no mere scavenger. While they may occasionally take advantage of an easily accessible meal, they are certainly capable of capturing and dispatching their own prey. It requires an impressive combination of speed and force to latch on to running prey while diving from the air. Considering that the average adult squeezing a hand might exert forty pounds of pressure, the eagle is herculean by comparison. With the snap of a grip, it snatches a meal in its talons with over four hundred pounds of pressure. Christian leaders may resist the comparison to the exertion of deadly force, but most would admit that there are times when it is essential for those in leadership to demonstrate the ability to identify what is important, move swiftly, and hold on with enormous strength. The wellbeing of our communities sometimes depends on that decisiveness and firmness. This sense of power also reminds us to remain open to the possibility that our every keen skill might be transformed into an instrument for good.

Eagle Vulnerabilities

The eagle's strengths are not the only dimension of the symbol that lends insight to Christian leaders. The truth is that an eagle's vulnerabilities, particularly its solitary nature, its limits in flight, and its occasional clumsiness, are equally as instructive. Everything that makes the eagle an extraordinary bird—its size, glide and hunting acumen—all come with trade-offs, and yet these weaknesses help us better appreciate our own need for wholeness.

One weakness, as least judged according to Christian sensibilities, is that eagles are not flocking birds. With the exception of wintering over in common places like the river valleys of southeast Minnesota or hunting from mutually convenient locations like the spit in Homer, Alaska, eagles remain rather solitary. At best, we might find

inklings of relational habits in the way they establish long partnerships through the aerial tumbling ritual called "cartwheeling" or the way they commit to certain territories by carefully maintaining enormous nests. Similarly, Christian leaders must remember to foster community and stability in our lives lest we become tempted to withdraw too far from the intensity of our work with people.

A second weakness is that eagles can carry only one-third of their body weight in flight, a total of about three to four pounds. The writers of the medieval encyclopedias were convinced that eagles could do battle with animals the size of deer and modern anecdotes prove that it is indeed possible for eagles to maim or kill animals much larger than we would expect. Even so, whether fishing over open water or hunting on dry land, eagles must eventually be selective about what they carry. In order to fly away they must choose either to abandon a portion of their prey or consume it in place. The same weight limits will always apply. On a related note, eagles must regurgitate fur and bones in the process of digesting their prey. While this may test the bounds of a tasteful metaphor, we would be wise to consider the mental and emotional burdens that we attempt to digest and carry as ministers. There are always limits to our capacities. If we are to fly, we must set down some of the weight.

The final weakness, and perhaps the one most apropos for Christian leaders, is that eagles are clumsy about takeoffs and landings. An eagle hunts from a soaring or perched position because it is far easier for the enormous bird to drop into flight. Otherwise, the majestic eagle fumbles to leave the ground. Upon landing, the usually proud and competent creature is humbled by the complete inability to touch down gently. The stories of Christian leaders I know are similar. Unless a person feels sufficiently supported and in control of the variables, it can be just as hard to take flight as it is to slow down gracefully. Almost invariably, transitions in ministry are accompanied by questions of vocation and calling, often specifically about whether or not one should take off or land. Christian leaders may have the ability to focus on far off things, soar high, and swoop down when a job needs to be done, but these very same assets can make it most difficult to stop and restart well.

The Invitation to Renewal

In some respects the renewal of vision is about slowing down and restarting with grace and clarity. It may be difficult to embrace the discomfort of the potentially clumsy process, but it is the price we pay for the tremendous privilege of employing otherwise majestic gifts. Once we accept that the true source of our weariness is a vision that is lacking, we must ask what does, in fact, touch us most deeply. If we peel back the layers with honesty, we will soon pass the failed aspirations of a particular program and the fleeting disappointments of short-term projects. Even difficult relationships do not fully explain the loss that cuts closest to the core—the same part of us that is reawakened by the sight of an eagle. In that sacred interior place we intuit the need to tend a fundamental vision that accompanies us as individuals wherever we go. It is a vision of two dimensions.

The first and most important dimension of this vision is God's loving acceptance. Renewal begins by drawing near to the image God holds of me. In that light, my identity is cast as one who is wholly and unconditionally loved. I am not accepted on the basis of what I have accomplished, nor on conditions of who I might become. I am received and embraced as the less than perfect person I am right now. Here, completely exposed and vulnerable, God has called me his own. Can I bear to look directly into the brightness of that truth? It is only possible with the confidence that my life is in Christ, the truest and most enduring source of my being and purpose. Henri Nouwen, master of the vocabulary of grace, considers this confidence the foundation of Christian leadership. He writes, "Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance."[7] Growing clarity about this relationship is crucial because it is the source of any vision to follow.

Self-acceptance is the second dimension to this core vision that is in need of renewal. This dimension is colored by an intimate knowledge of my own strengths and weaknesses, often obscured by the latter. It can become clouded by fickle voices, internal and

external ones, which are not of God. Thankfully, self-acceptance is renewed by God's acceptance. Brennan Manning, well-known author of *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, urges us to cultivate a truer vision of self, infused with God's vision of us, through solitude with God: "The indispensable condition for developing and maintaining the awareness of our belovedness is time alone with God. In solitude we tune out the nay-saying whispers of our worthlessness and sink down into the mystery of our true self. . . . Our identity rests in God's relentless tenderness for us revealed in Jesus Christ."[8] This is reminiscent of Hrabanus' exhortation that those with dim eyes should become "nourished by the hope of heavenly things." God's relentless tenderness is already at work in us, renewing and strengthening. We have only to turn toward the mind of God. With even the slightest recovery of self-acceptance underway, we begin to reconnect with our sense of purpose. Manning seems to speak directly to Christian leaders when he goes on to write, "The recovery of passion begins with the recovery of my true self as the beloved."[9] In that declaration we hear the echoes of the ancients convinced that the eagle was renewed and restored by plunging deep into the waters of life.

The eagle symbolizes the call to renewal and makes clear that the recovery of our core vision will not be of our own making. The Scriptures assure us that it is the Lord who lifts us up. Exodus 19:4 describes the Lord's presence to Moses and the people of Israel as an eagle that spreads its wings and bears its young aloft. Psalm 103 speaks a blessing to the God who redeems, loves, satisfies, and, as we have seen, renews our youth like an eagle. This faith reaffirms Isaiah 40:31, which has stirred hopes for the weary throughout the ages:

> They that hope in the LORD will renew their strength,
> they will soar on eagles' wings;
> They will run and not grow weary,
> walk and not grow faint.

The Lord consistently promises to renew our strength and yet we are reminded that we may well expect some element of waiting. God's redeeming, loving, and renewing will not necessarily come immediately, swiftly, or within the boundaries of our expectations.

We might more readily assume that we are being invited to take part in a gradual and graced movement toward clarity that continues unfolding our whole lives long.

A Vision Clarified through the Act of Ministry

Even in the waiting and the unfolding, Christian leaders are called to re-engage ministry with whatever degree of emerging clarity we currently enjoy. The entire process of renewal, not just the end result, is part of the re-orientation toward ministry. Ultimately, we seek a vision for ministry that is always being sharpened on the rock of Christ. Although external circumstances may actually change very little, an interior awareness of our vision-in-progress helps us turn toward our experiences of ministry with a greater degree of receptivity and discernment. That means trusting our lived experience itself as formative material.

Our involvement in the church and in communities is the learning environment in which we practice giving expression to our vision and continue refining it through the lens of experience. In this way, the practice of ministry is not only the expression of vision, but also the very means of sharpening it. Kathleen Cahalan, in *Introducing the Practice of Ministry*, articulates well this integrative dynamic: "The professional practice of ministry constitutes the dynamic interaction of what we know, competence in the skill to act, and the moral virtues of the person we are and are becoming. Practice is the integration of doing, knowing, and being."[10] Part of the genius in Cahalan's observation is that integration does not always flow predictably from clarity of being or knowing into doing. Sometimes the dynamic of discovery is actually initiated through practice and, in turn, shapes our sense of knowing and being. We are able to return to the trenches of ministry with partial clarity if we can trust that it is possible for our visions to continue being renewed in the midst of our service to others. That renewal might even be contagious.

One summer day near Mt. Rainer in Washington State, my wife and I hiked with our then nine- and seven-year-old children, Zoe and Nathanael, up a trail that gained a daunting three thousand feet in elevation. The trek was nearly four miles each way, a tough

but not insurmountable challenge, and we had more confidence in the children than they had in themselves. As the trail curled and climbed and as the children became more tired and impatient, we adults became even more diligent in extending encouragement and comfort. Truth be told, there was also some firm prodding. When at last we reached the summit, we encountered a sky so bright and clear that we could see the region's four mountains, a rare occurrence in the often overcast Northwest. Against that backdrop, red faced and sweaty, Zoe raised her fists high in the air and shouted, "I never thought I could do that in a hundred years!" Together we had engaged an exhausting climb one step at a time, and a little girl made her way down the mountain feeling like a giant. It made me wonder if I had just caught a glimpse of God's relentless tenderness, the way God firmly encourages and gently accompanies a beloved child up and down the mountains of life. The name of the pass, by the way, was Eagle Peak.

Eagle Grounded, Perched, and Soaring

It is not every day that we revel in clear skies and mountain tops. The ordinary realities of ministry will always ensure that there is more to Christian leadership than the thrill of reaching great heights. Whatever the circumstances might bring, we are called to sustain our core God-given vision and to give expression to that vision through the exercise of ministry. At that intersection of being and purpose, the eagle archetype can continue to invite Christian leaders to renewal. The sections to follow take their cues from the eagle to demonstrate nine qualities for leadership. Each chapter strives to combine some re-invigorating perspective with useful applications. They do not necessarily flow in a linear fashion and the order should not be understood to suggest that one quality is more important or advanced than another. Consider them interdependent attributes, arranged for clarity, which tend to reinforce one another as leaders learn and grow over time and through experience.

There are moments when we find ourselves somewhat awkwardly at ground level, trying to regain our bearings within the heat of the moment so that we might act with integrity. Chapters 2 to 4 explore the qualities of awareness, poise and intentionality. Sometimes we

will have the advantage of a perch that offers a better vantage point and the potential for more purposeful conversations. Accordingly, chapters 5 to 7 will take up conviction, mutuality, and readiness. Finally, despite any illusion of ease and grace, the call to soar often comes upon the turbulent currents of change and ambiguity. Chapters 8 to 10 will consider the necessities of courage, honesty and hope to the faithful practice of ministry. The majestic eagle has long inspired others with its clarity of being and purpose whether it is grounded, perched, or soaring. Let us consider how the same is true for Christian leaders.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. Read Isaiah 40:27-31.
2. Pray this fine hymn by John Bell, member of the Iona Community:

> Take, O take me as I am.
> Summon out what I shall be.
> Set your seal upon my heart
> And live in me.

3. What aspects of your calling seem most clear at this time?
4. What strengths and weaknesses do you carry into ministry?
5. What happens as you begin to look directly into God's relentless tenderness for you?

Notes

[1] Robert Wicks, *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

[2] *Aristotle's History of Animals in Ten Books*, trans. Richard Cresswell (London: H. G. Bohn, 1862), 9.23, 253.

[3] *Pliny Natural History with an English Translation in Ten Volumes,* Vol. III, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 10.4, 301.

[4] *Hrabanus Maurus: De Universo, The Peculiar Properties of Words and their Mystical Significance*, vol. 1, trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2009), 262. I am grateful to Catherine and Gary DeKrey for their assistance with this citation.

[5] L. Oscar Kuhns, trans. "Bestiaries and Lapidaries," in *Library of the World's Best Literature, Ancient and Modern*, vol. 4, edited by Charles Dudley Warner et al. (Project Gutenberg EBook, 1896), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13220/13220-h/13220-h.htm#BESTIARIES_03.

[6] David Badke, "Allegorical/Moral Meaning of the Eagle," *The Medieval Bestiary*, http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast232.htm. Used by permission.

[7] Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 42.

[8] Brendan Manning, *Abba's Child: The Cry of the Heart for Intimate Belonging* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 34–35.

[9] Ibid., 105.

[10] Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010), xi.

Grounded in the Moment

The eagle on the ground may not be in a position to use fully its gifts of far vision and flight, but it remains capable and focused, nonetheless. So, too, Christian leaders cultivate awareness, poise, and intentionality in order to maintain their personal agency in challenging situations.

2

Awareness

Welcome the Questions

During the first draft of this chapter I found myself stuck between two meetings. I could not seem to shake worries about them, making it hard to get to sleep in the evenings and preventing a quiet start to the mornings. The concerns began with a mixed message from a supervisor late one Friday: "We need to talk . . . but it can wait until first thing on Monday." Uncertain about the agenda and unsettled by the sense of quasi-urgency, I began to rehearse in my mind what various sorts of things might warrant such a nearly-pressing appointment. Unfortunately, I wrestled with those reactions on and off over the course of two days (and nights). Despite attempts to talk myself down from the ledge, anxiety continued to nag at me, making me feel disconnected and unproductive.

I was almost relieved when the meeting finally started. After a few polite but strained exchanges, the supervisor began with items that I had anticipated. Having braced myself for the worst with a full range of responses, I welcomed hearing favorable decisions about some program related questions. From there, however, we moved into unpredictable territory. On one topic, I was surprised to learn that a long-past situation had caused discomfort for a few in the community who wished to remain anonymous. On another, I was informed (as opposed to consulted) about changes to regular procedures that affected the team I supervise. As still other topics bubbled up, I gathered through intimations that new hesitations were being expressed about an innovation that was already well underway. In light of these surprising and jumbled things, I was asked to make a report to a larger group in a few weeks. I fought my

eagerness to flee and labored to respond as well as I could, but after the tense weekend I had little energy left in reserve. The conversation eventually finished with a few more pleasantries. Even with the first meeting behind me, I carried residual anxieties into the next.

The most troubling thing about all this is that I felt small. My physical reactions had been little more than reptilian, and the flood of fight or flight chemicals in my body were compounded by a lack of sleep and a disrupted weekend. These experiences, or at least my fixations upon them, were clearly diminishing my focus and creativity. Thinking seemed stunted, self-serving, and circular. Conversations tended to be shallow under the weight of a wandering mind and a deficit in patience. Feelings and intuition, usually reliable allies for me, were too clouded to be of much use. This smallness was isolating and ineffective and yet, as a leader in ministry, I remained responsible for pressing on.

Few of us could claim we never had days or weekends such as these. In fact, it is likely that each of us has experienced this and even more. Place too many "we need to talk" conversations back to back or string together a few too many weekends in which our hearts are troubled, and we lose not only our time of rest, but also our bearings, our resolve, and perhaps even our sense of calling. Our bodies and our spirits absorb the challenges of ministry. It is important to pause and recognize that when something physiological is happening, it is a signal that our larger and better selves are at risk.

In a reactive and anxious condition we are less able to see ourselves within the context of a greater mystery or contribute fully to compelling missions that rise above any one individual. Practically speaking, the next difficult conversation is always on the horizon. What helps us regularly notice and let go of this small self so that we can be present in more healthy ways? When we are responsible for shaping significant conversations, in what ways might we as leaders evoke the larger selves in others? One option is the practice of welcoming questions. In this chapter we will explore how questions move toward us, move away from us, and invite us into a deeper interior place. If we can appreciate that process as part of Christ's call to discipleship, we might foster a better disposition even within intense interactions.

Questions Moving Toward Us

It is one thing to dispense questions and quite another to be on the receiving end, as I was to discover during the second uncomfortable meeting. I was presenting my report as requested and, despite the clever and comprehensive document that I had spent hours preparing, I was jabbed with one question after another. It did not take long for the group to drift from the stated purpose of the meeting. The flurry of questions swiftly led me into a vulnerable place, no longer delivering talking points but attempting to listen quickly and respond spontaneously. The exchange became so unpredictable that I could do little more than ward off one rapid-fire question at a time. Then, about half-way through the barrage, a touch of grace washed over me and I began to appreciate that questions moving toward us are actually useful in a number of ways.

The first thing questions awaken in us are the very kinds of things that cannot be addressed in the same moment. We will notice a rush of uncomfortable and unsettling feelings. The sensation is something like dust being kicked up by boots in an old Western scuffle. We can taste the dirt in the air and see it clouding our view, but we must keep moving. Not until hours later will we realize that our strong reactions to the questions had been related more to our own self-doubt, frustrations, and fears than to the actual content of the interaction. Such meetings create confrontations with our shadows that author and Jungian analyst James Hollis would call an opportunity for healing and an agenda for growth.[1] We pay attention to what questions stir up within us because our reactions can signal what we most need.

Secondly, and especially important within the immediate flow of interactions, we notice that the questions of others help us better understand the actual purpose of a meeting. In my case, the questions were unveiling a need to express some anxieties. Even if the others do not articulate their questions well (or at least in a way that is comfortable for us), their lines of inquiry give indications about what they think they are hearing and what degree of resistance they are each experiencing. As we listen, we can picture a dark night sky above us. With each question speakers prick one more hole that allows in just a little more starlight. We need people to keep asking their questions so that, over time, we can find a constellation or two

from which to take our bearings. Otherwise, we are left navigating conversations with nothing but our own unreliable assumptions.

Additionally, we might begrudgingly notice that some questions do, in fact, trigger some new perspectives for us. To the extent that we are able to manage our defensive reflexes and really listen for the nuggets of truth embedded in each question, the give-and-take can become an exercise that sharpens our own thinking. Legal experts might possess an agility for oral argument that enables them to spontaneously pivot and run with weak lines in their opponents' thinking, but not everyone does. It is not a skill that many in ministry have gained through training because argument, as such, is not precisely the ideal. The ideal is mutuality. Too often we enter conversations prepared to deliver a message based on preformed ideas, when the exercise of community actually requires dialogue. If it is possible to cultivate a more malleable space for respect and mutuality, it will come through the honest attempt to engage one another through questions. Only then can our perspectives be enhanced by what someone else is able to see.

Questions Moving Away from Us

Questions are the bread and butter of good leadership. We introduce them into conversations in order to honor the experiences of another person, to help foster a reflective pause, and to explore areas of ambiguity. Doing so, however, is not always easy. I, for one, have been greatly helped by the authors of *Crucial Conversations,* who strive to help leaders recognize the demands and potential embedded in truly mutual exchange. As they describe them, "crucial conversations" are discussions that include opposing opinions, strong emotions, and high stakes.[2] Whether we stumble into these conversations unexpectedly or convene them intentionally, the general principles for promoting healthy interaction remain the same: *increase the sense of safety*, *stay focused on what we really want*, and *listen for the other's story*. The authors themselves offer more extensive guidelines for navigating such conversations, but in the heat of the moment, these three principles have proven most helpful to me in regaining a listening posture.

The first important principle of a crucial conversation is *safety*. We can often intuit whether or not there is a sufficient level of safety just as easily as we can intuit that a conversation has just become a crucial one. To increase the sense of safety, we take steps to be proactive about a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect. Is the setting as appropriate and as private as this conversation warrants? Is our verbal tone and body language communicating what we intend to be saying about our intentions and our commitment to this relationship? True safety is not about masking emotions or simply making people comfortable. It is about creating an environment that mirrors the importance and purposes of the exchange.

When we have the luxury of time to foster a safe environment, it can be helpful to imagine the setting and context from the other person's point of view or in light of our own past experiences. What would it be like to walk into this particular space at this time? What purposes might the other person have for this conversation? Is the agenda clear and transparent enough to keep the conversation on track?

Once a crucial conversation is underway, and having done what possible to increase the sense of safety, the next principle is to *stay focused on what we really want*. We enter crucial conversations because we truly desire something important. Whatever the topic at hand, staying focused is about tapping into that underlying desire, the one non-negotiable. That means identifying something more significant than any one individual's preferences. Non-negotiables are often about integrity of mission and relationship. Those desires are very likely shared by all parties, even if the intensity of emotions are making that difficult to see at a given moment. Staying in touch with those desires helps us remain honest and focused on the real purpose of the conversation. Even if only one person is able to hold that space, it can help others keep letting go of tangential issues in favor of the most central ones.

The discipline of focusing on what we really want has the important effect of reducing the conversation's temperature by simplifying the range of issues and promoting the search for common ground. Sure, sometimes we find ourselves peppered with uncomfortable questions in unsafe places, but even then our guiding light can be

the mutual searching for what seems to be at stake beneath the various issues that are attracting attention. What mutual purposes do we share?

After safety and focus, which are essentially about honoring the importance of the interaction and fostering an effective container for it, the remaining principle is *listening to understand*. Listening is the key to meaty dialogue because it enables us to enter into the sacred space of another person's perspective and meaning. Speaking, by comparison, is quite easy. Listening is the way we embody our commitment to and investment in another person for the sake of something larger than ourselves. The difficulty here is that we are talking about listening within the context of a crucial conversation. These are not pleasant and mutually enriching chats at a coffee shop. Opposing views, strong emotions, and high stakes require our full attention even while we are experiencing an adrenaline rush. In such moments compassion becomes indispensable.

During the second uncomfortable meeting, I remember my attitude softening a bit more when I realized that at least one person was asking tangential questions because she simply could not understand the topic at hand. Compassion can help us reduce our defensiveness and regain the capacity to listen within tense situations. In the throes of a conversation, we might occasionally be surprised when we notice another person's fear, hurt or a hint of something yet unspoken. A kind observation about that vulnerability can lessen our fear without diminishing our carefulness. (Perhaps this is something akin to a park ranger's assurance that wild bears and cougars are really more scared of us than we are of them.) In a compassionate moment we catch a glimpse of something that God already knows well—that this person is less an adversary and more God's dear child. Sometimes it is a perception of this childlikeness (sometimes even childishness) that can prick our compassion and calm us down enough to listen. How is the other experiencing this conversation? What assumptions have led her/him to these conclusions? What is at stake for this person?

Crucial conversations are not easy, but because they carry the potential to transform relationships, we are called to nurture environments that are conducive to them. If we can find our way

toward open-ended and sincere questions, the odds are good that we are increasing safety, focus, and true listening. These conversations will never be without an element of unpredictability. We might prefer order and clarity as if well-written statements make it almost entirely unnecessary for us to participate in risky to-and-fro, but that is not the nature of ministry. People need interaction for reasons beyond fact-finding. Questions help us set down our predetermined agendas so that we can better attend to what is happening in the world around us.

With a disposition closer to curiosity than control, we are in a better position to test our own assumptions, foster respect for others, and learn to grow together. A well-placed question can positively interrupt a charged situation by inviting others to join us in the admittedly uncomfortable place of the unknown. That invitation may or may not be accepted and we must learn to become comfortable with this reality. There is radical hospitality in honoring someone's choice to refuse conversation because that freedom gives any choice its meaning.

During a crucial conversation, some contagious potential is released into the air on the wings of a question. When someone in the room chooses to accept it and respond, a bond is formed. Only then can we journey together, even if briefly, in ways neither of us completely controls. On the rough days we might consider it a great gift to have floated even one good question into a tense discussion. On better days we might actually find the process a bit exhilarating. Over time, engaging others through questions becomes a habit and that habit contributes to a culture of mutual respect and affirmation that is far too rare.

Internal Questions

Sometimes people choose not to respond to our questions just like we fail to pursue our own. In fact, it is not at all uncommon to resist them. Hollis observed that, from the earliest days of being a therapist, what brought women and men of any age to his office was the discovery that previous attempts to respond to the questions in their lives had proven inadequate. Each had experienced a

sea change in their lives, some significant shift in their perceptions about themselves or their place in the world. This sea change was accompanied by a series of increasingly ineffective strategies for dealing with the shift. Although Hollis is writing in the context of second half of life issues, the four lines of defense that he identifies resonate well for any in ministry who have, at one time or another, found themselves attempting to cope with disquieting questions:

> None of them had come to therapy as a first choice. Their initial line of defense against the eruptions of the unconscious into their lives was denial. (This is our most understandable, most primitive defense, which, if continued indefinitely, proves to be the only truly pathological state of being.) Typically, the second strategy was to revivify their efforts in service to the old plan. Their third choice was to strike off toward some new projection—a new job, a better (different) relationship, a seductive ideology, or sometimes to drift into some unconscious "self-treatment plan" such as an addiction or an affair. Their fourth choice, after having tried all of the above, was to admit futility and reluctantly come to therapy, feeling frustrated, sometimes angry and defeated, and always, always humbled. This shaky beginning marked the onset of the deepest inquiry they had ever undertaken, the risky adventure of getting to know who they really were, often quite apart from whomever they had become.[3]

Who among us does not encounter deep, unsettling inquiries and entertain the four defenses in our own peculiar ways? There is nothing strategic about the way it happens. We simply slip down what appears to be the way of least resistance a time or two, only to find ourselves humbled, years later, at a dead end.

The slipping begins with the elemental tactics of denial and avoidance, as we tuck the internal questions away for "later" and hope they will disappear on their own. There is no use fighting battles over small things, we tell ourselves. That is *to pretend we do not know*. Then, like Sisyphus doomed to roll his boulder up the hill only to watch it roll down, we dig in and work harder. We say "yes" too often and throw everything we have into asserting our will against things that do not go our way, believing our every desire

could be met if only we had a little more time and energy. That is *to employ more of what we want to know*. The third defense is to move away from the questions that make us most uncomfortable. Something deep inside us is close to the breaking point but not so far gone that we cannot make one last ditch attempt at escape. We flee, expecting the questions to remain neatly confined in the world we have left behind. That is *to refuse what we know*. When at long last we become too tired to outwit or outrun the questions by ourselves, then our defenses fall. That is the moment we surrender and ask for help. Now begins the risky adventure *to know more truly*, a journey that sets out from the questions we cannot help but welcome.

Hollis suggests that we become conscious of the deepest questions in our lives through the symptoms we can no longer avoid. Despite our best hopes that willpower or skill can elude inconvenience or displeasure, we will eventually encounter the nagging consequences of all the anxieties, depressing thoughts, and conflicts that we have worked so hard to keep buried. Internal questions persist. "Our first, natural desire is to suppress them," Hollis writes, "but we must learn to read them as clues to the wounded wishes of the soul, or as the autonomous protest of the soul over our mismanagement."[4] We are summoned—eventually pressed—to welcome the questions that must arise within us. Through them we encounter unexpected invitations to greater freedom.

In my experience of working as a spiritual director with those engaged in discernment, a presenting inquiry taken up honestly almost invariably yields to more substantive and relational questions than originally acknowledged. For example, one person entered spiritual direction with me in order to discern his calling to ordained ministry and discovered spiritual concerns about his belonging and self-worth in the eyes of God. Another came to explore her vocation as a writer and found herself instead reconciled to a family member. Those discoveries happen too consistently to deny the rich gift of healing that God offers through the questions that are rooted deep within us.

Questions in a Biblical Light

Questions have long been attached to the notion of healing and growth. According to the gospels, Jesus welcomed questions as opportunities to teach and inspire, a model that Christian leaders would be wise to emulate. While he sometimes expresses frustration with the disciples' slowness to comprehend, the Scriptures suggest that Jesus both receives questions and employs them in order to connect more deeply with those who followed him. He uses them to respond to the disciples' curiosity and extend provoking invitations, demonstrating how questions always remain part of the program for growth.

One example is John 9 in which Jesus *sees* a man born blind and the disciples ask a question that opens a stunning narrative: "'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him'" (9:2-3). The chapter then unfolds into an intimate scene of healing as Jesus places mud made from his own saliva over the eyes of the blind man. At Jesus' command (and without question, incidentally), the blind man washes three times in the pool of Siloam and is healed. Upon *seeing* the man, others questioned whether he was indeed the same beggar they had known before, and if so, where they might find the one who had healed him. The Pharisees followed with their own interrogation, first pushing their questions upon the beggar's parents, then the beggar himself, and eventually Jesus. All the while, it is the questions that turn the reader's attention again and again to the challenging truth about Jesus. By the end of the chapter it is made clear, through their own questions, that the Pharisees' spiritual blindness remains.

Questions are part and parcel of formation as Christ's disciples. Honest questions, especially those without easy answers, help us move closer to the truth of our own blindness and the ways in which Christ is opening our eyes. They evoke a disposition of curiosity and humility and, whether we welcome them through the encounter with the Word or our neighbor, questions continue inviting us to grow. If we can trust that God might bring important questions into our lives through others, we need also be mindful that God

offers holy questions to others through us. When we are called to present such questions, let us be especially careful to do so with gentleness and respect, for each of us, one conversation at a time, is attempting to welcome the important questions beneath it all: Who am I in Christ, and what am I called to do with the one life I have been given?

For Further Reflection . . .

1. How do you notice yourself responding when questions move toward you?
2. What is similar or different as questions move away from you?
3. What important question or conversation have you been avoiding? How might you increase the safety in that conversation, stay focused on what you really want, and listen to understand?

Notes

[1] James Hollis, *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife*, Studies in Jungian Psychology by Jungian Analysts (Toronto, ON: Inner City, 1993), 43.

[2] Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 1–2.

[3] Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Gotham, 2005), 24.

[4] Ibid., 33.

3

Poise

Reflect, Then Respond

While not every situation rises to the level of a crucial conversation or dives deep into soul questions with the power to change our lives, Christian leaders rarely drift through a day experiencing nothing more than ordinary tasks and mundane responsibilities. More regularly we find ourselves navigating a continuous stream of demands for our attention and getting caught up in waves of stimuli and expectations. These waves rush in, for instance, on those mornings when we arrive to work and field questions or discover problems before we even set down our bags. Our interior defenses go on high alert and, for the remainder of the day, we just try to keep up while voicemails flash and inboxes fill with quagmires. Alternatively, and sometimes simultaneously, the demands flood our attention so slowly and steadily that they go unnoticed until something finally gives way. Is it any wonder that we lose our poise and slip with a short temper or sharp comment when we are tired, pressed, and caught up in the currents of reacting too quickly?

The danger is easy to recognize for any well-intentioned leader. Without a healthy margin between stimulus and response, we risk the relationships that are the heart of our ministries. Quite simply, what we say and do, day in and day out, either reinforces or hinders both the quality of connection that our community enjoys and the integrity of the mission we share. That is why many moments call upon us to contribute something more thoughtful than our less-than-certain gut reactions. To tap into that more considered perspective, leaders need to make room for reflection before choosing

to respond. The stream of interactions will keep flowing. Sometimes that window for reflection will be measured in seconds and, at other times, it will stretch out over days. The key is to pause in some way, reclaim our centeredness in God's presence, and then respond in the most healthy way we can manage.

If we boil the challenge down to two of its more manageable parts, we need to focus on busyness and hooks. The dynamic of busyness appears on the surface as our schedules fill and our attention becomes divided. Some busyness is to be expected in highly relational ministries, and yet we each know from experience that too much activity takes us to the edge of crabby, where we are always out of sorts and never quite satisfied with the quality of our work. Being too busy to be attentive increases the likelihood of our responding poorly. In contrast, hooks snag something below the surface. Hooks are words or actions we encounter that prick a particularly strong emotional response in us. We usually feel them before we recognize them for what they are. Hooks expose some form of anxiety, self-doubt or fear that we have experienced in another situation at another time. Like busyness, hooks lead to poor responses when we fail to navigate our immediate emotions well.

A woman we will call Laura came to see me for spiritual direction after some strong encounters with busyness and hooks. For the past number of years she had worked carefully to build up the Christian formation ministry at her parish. Her good zeal had been focused by solid training, extensive experience, and sincere commitment to relationships. The feedback from adults and families had seemed positive and the core volunteers were meaningfully engaged. Life was full but satisfying until a crisis suddenly broke open. Laura had snapped at a trustee in public, damaging a number of relationships, her reputation, as well as her own confidence. Even having made amends, things had not been quite the same since.

Laura started by telling the story of her outburst with the trustee and quickly realized that the real tensions preceded that particular interaction. A year earlier Laura had lost a friend and colleague to cancer. The rest of the staff were supportive in the early days of the loss, but over time few seemed to fully appreciate the important role Laura's colleague had played in the community's ministry

of Christian formation. For example, Laura had picked up additional responsibilities to help finish out the school year. Within a few months, however, it was clear that the pastor did not intend to hire someone in her colleague's place. There were budget considerations, he argued, and some changes he had in mind. Laura just carried on with her grief, disappointment, and extra duties. When the trustee proposed to repurpose the office Laura and her colleague had shared, he had unwittingly touched off emotions in Laura that were still quite raw.

Our task that day in spiritual direction was to carve out enough space for Laura to reflect upon her experience and see how God might be stirring. Awakening to the real dynamics and sources of her difficulty were only the first step. Laura also needed to explore some ways to respond from a more prayerful interior place. Nothing around her had changed. The pain of a lost friend and colleague, the additional professional demands, the pastor's changes to the vision, and even the trustee's proposal were all still very real. Laura and I spent some time talking about three classic Christian disciplines that would help her maintain her poise: watch your thoughts, guard your heart, and practice moderation. These time-tested disciplines are found in the teachings of Christians who, beginning in the third century, lived in the desert near Egypt and strongly influenced Benedict's approach to monasticism. They remain useful for Christian leaders today.

Watch Your Thoughts

To watch your thoughts is to pay attention to what is happening within your mind, your heart, and your body before you speak or take action. You might notice impressions coming and going, ideas swirling, emotions (positive or negative) coming on in a flush, a dull sense, or even something physical. Initially, you do not need to judge what you notice to be good or bad; you simply need to become more aware of it. The beauty and challenge of being human is that an internal script is always scrolling—not often of our own intentional making. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are a natural part of the human experience. Becoming aware of them, or watching

them, lessens the likelihood that those multidimensional impulses will become the unexamined drivers of our behavior. Over time we learn to notice and respond to the unique patterns and sources of our own thoughts and emotions as an aspect of our formation as Christian disciples.

When the Desert Fathers and Mothers spoke of thoughts, they focused on what happens within us that can become a barrier to prayer and attentiveness to the presence of God. Even centuries ago they postulated that, since human beings are created with the capacity to feel and think and remember, it was natural for people to emote and wonder. Thoughts simply happen. Therefore, the difficulty is not precisely with a thought itself, but with a thought's effect in distracting a person from the presence of God. They had learned through experience that thoughts would rise in their consciousness, stir other thoughts and suggest actions. They also recognized moments of choosing along the way, in which a person could decide whether or not to reinforce or act upon those thoughts. Repeated choices, healthy or not, could become habitual. Good habits could lead to virtue, the monks reasoned, but poor habits could suggest that a person has been overcome by afflictions. At that point, the mind and heart are far from God.[1]

We can see in the Desert Tradition the ongoing challenge of turning toward God, a struggle that requires watchfulness and honesty. As a saying attributed to Amma Syncletica illustrates: "The soul is like a ship when great waves break over it, and at the same time it sinks because the hold is too full. We are just like that: we lose as much by the exterior faults we commit as by the thoughts inside us."[2] Syncletica helps us appreciate that the great ship of the soul has both interior and exterior vulnerabilities. Today's Christian leaders can easily relate to the sense of being overloaded mentally and emotionally while waves keep breaking over us. We need to address what weighs us down so that we might be more ready for the incoming waves.

The desert monks demonstrated some practical ways we might go about this. They commended a radical honesty in sharing one's thoughts with an elder and we need to find ways to do the same, whether through spiritual direction, counseling, coaching or some other form of companionship. The monks also taught direct approaches

such as acknowledging the thought and letting it go, combatting the thought with a word or phrase, or surrendering anew to God in prayer. Two good examples from this tradition include a Desert Abba's phrase, "My soul does not want it!"[3] and the great prayer of the psalmist that is prayed by Benedictines during the Liturgy of the Hours: "O God, come to my assistance" (Ps 70:1). Practice these responses, for when the ship is on rough seas, watching your thoughts becomes a matter of survival.

Guard Your Heart

A second discipline we might retrieve from the Desert Tradition is guarding your heart. The heart is a symbol of our sacred center, our identity, and our core purpose. We protect that center when we discern carefully what we will allow entry. My wife, for example, has a sensitivity to violent images and chooses to maintain that low tolerance by refusing to entertain herself with movies or shows that make her uncomfortable. One way to guard your heart is to avoid things that are not helpful to you whenever possible. When we do not have the luxury of distancing ourselves from people and situations that make us uncomfortable, however, it becomes even more important that we safeguard our souls through the practice of good boundaries. This means taking responsibility for our own needs and feelings, speaking clearly and honestly, and engaging others with integrity.

Guarding your heart was embodied in many dimensions of desert monastic life. Celibacy contributed to a life of relative simplicity, while a rhythm of daily prayer provided grounding in Scripture, sacrament, and community. The monastic cells (private quarters) were deliberately humble in order to reinforce the commitment to be alone before God. The tradition's harsher treatments of food and body aside, they were also careful to avoid letting everyday needs become a distraction to prayer. Fasting and minimizing their number of possessions were central practices. Structures like these and more were preventative measures intended to help Desert monks shelter their attention to God.

While modern Christians could easily get lost in the particulars, the following story about Abba Poemen points beyond the structures themselves to the spirit of guarding the heart: "Some

old men came to see Abba Poemen and said to him, 'When we see brothers dozing at [the sacred office], should we rouse them so that they will be watchful?' He said to them, 'For my part when I see a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.'"[4] The Abba surprises the old men with a compassionate response so gentle that it masterfully unveils the way he guards his own heart. Who would have been most attentive at prayer? It would not have been the brother who was dozing, nor the old men who were distracted by that brother. It would have been Abba Poemen alone, who would have seen a need, responded with kindness and then simply returned his attention to prayer. Abba Poemen also demonstrates the way he guards his heart in maintaining his composure with the old men. He did not allow the anxieties of the others to become his own, but responded with wisdom and gentleness shaped by his many years of monastic life.

Desert monks would have learned many practical strategies for guarding their hearts, at least three of which remain instructive today. First, there are times to flee. Thoughts related to sex and anger, the monks knew well, come upon us quickly. Guard of the heart involves distancing ourselves from potential temptations whenever possible and avoiding situations that make matters worse. Secondly, monks memorized the Scriptures. There was the practical dimension of limited personal access to written texts, but the disciplined commitment to memorize Scripture also points to an appreciation for how the word of God shapes our dispositions over time. Memorization not only forms the heart; it helps the Scriptures rest ready on our lips so that we might respond to a thought with a verse. Lastly, manual labor did more than provide for the monks' daily needs. It helped them spiritually by keeping their hands and minds occupied with the task before them. Working with our hands—or exercising our bodies in this comparatively sedentary age—offers an indispensable physical outlet for our energies, as well as an opportunity to refocus our watchfulness.

Practice Moderation

A third discipline to consider from the Desert Tradition is moderation, and it would be difficult to overstate its importance for

our times. Moderation relates to finding what some faith traditions call "the middle way." During retreats, I have often heard Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, teach the practice of moderation as discerning an appropriate course that is "not too high, not too low; not too much, not too little; and not too often, not too infrequent." Even speaking that phrase slowly and aloud introduces a spirit of calm and deliberateness that is generally absent from the schedules and task lists of most Christian leaders. Moderation contributes to long-term wellness when we liken the call to ministry more to a marathon than a sprint, and yet it remains difficult at the most elementary levels.

Food provides a practical example, although the principles certainly apply more broadly. High and low speaks to the quality or richness of our sources for nourishment. Our diet should not rely solely on the most complex elements of the food chain, just as it would be insufficient to rely only on the least. Conscious care for appropriate portions and timeliness are the obvious spectrums of quantity and frequency. The point is not that we avoid feasting per se, but that we become more mindful of our tendency to eat indiscriminately. Benedict himself followed in the footsteps of the Desert Tradition when he wrote wisely about moderation with regard to food in RB 39: each monk is allotted a certain amount of food and wine under general circumstances, but when the work is hard or a person's weakness is too great, adjustments should be made to the portions. This is only one example of Benedict's pastoral moderation, a genius that helps explain how the Rule has endured through the centuries.

An earlier saying from the Desert Tradition attributed to Abba Anthony speaks with similar pastoral sensitivity and evokes a careful attention to speech, time, expectation, and even self-regard:

> A hunter in the desert saw Abba Anthony enjoying himself with the brethren and he was shocked. Wanting to show him that it was necessary sometimes to meet the needs of the brethren, the old man said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and shoot it." So he did. The old man then said, "Shoot another," and he did so. Then the old man said, "Shoot yet again," and the hunter replied "If I bend my bow so much I will break it." Then the

> old man said to him, "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch the brethren beyond measure they will soon break. Sometimes it is necessary to come down to meet their needs." When he heard these words the hunter was pierced by compunction and, greatly edified by the old man, he went away. As for the brethren, they went home strengthened.[5]

All who work at breakneck pace and amid competing demands would be wise to heed Abba Anthony's fresh call to Sabbath: "It is the same with the work of God. If we stretch them beyond measure they will soon break." Even the best of intentions will eventually yield to human limitations on time and energy. Seek out the wise and sustainable middle way. Work not too much, not too little. Sleep not too often, not too infrequently. Eat, live, and think of yourself not too high, not too low.

The Three Disciplines in Action

A month after our conversation about watching your thoughts, guarding your heart, and practicing moderation, Laura returned in good spirits. "I did it!" she said, "I practiced the three disciplines—and it worked!" Laura then told me how she had experimented with them and discovered some helpful images. Her story went something like this:

A Ship on the Sea

One of my experiments in watching my thoughts began in a small room with two people who intimidated me for some reason. I arrived on time and waited while they finished their business, an inconvenience that I now appreciate to be a gift from God. During my wait, I noticed that my whole body had surged with a complexity of emotions that exceeded by far the demands of the situation. Like Amma Syncletica said, the hull of my ship was already full when the waves started coming. It was as if the weight of earlier experiences of self-doubt and frustrations with authority had all rushed into this one moment. I felt myself flush and tremble, so I began to watch those familiar thoughts more carefully. Ignoring the two in the room for a time, I began breathing in and out the

prayer I've heard when praying with Benedictines: "O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me." As I prayed, I recalled past conversations with trusted people who had helped me work through these thoughts and feelings before. I kept breathing my prayer. One thought would rise up in me but fall away when another rose. I kept breathing and praying, even as more thoughts continued to rise and fall. When the meeting began ten minutes later, my ship was steadier in the waves and I kept praying.

An Oil Lamp

I experienced guarding my heart kind of like an oil lamp with a glass lens. The wick might burn brightly enough uncovered, but it flickers in the shifting wind when it is unprotected. A glass lens set over the flame, however, shields the same light and keeps it burning steadily, brightly. I remember holding that image of a shielded light in my mind as the uncomfortable meeting continued. That alone proved one way to guard my heart. As the waves came and I kept praying, I turned my body slightly away from the most intense person. I corrected my posture, unclenched my hands, and called to mind those whom I serve. Then a verse of comfort came to me, "Do not fear: I am with you" (Isa 41:10). As the others spoke I carefully identified those things that belonged to me and those that did not. When it was my turn to speak, I did so honestly and calmly and tried to maintain a sense that I was protecting a sacred place within me. I was guarding my heart!

Water Seeking Its Level

There was something else I have been thinking about. It seems to me that our souls seek moderation like water seeks its own level. Whatever stirs, whatever is added or taken away, we want to flow toward a healthy, natural middle way. The call to moderation came to me midway through the meeting. It occurred to me that this conversation would not last forever, and I remembered having watched myself ride emotionally charged waves up and down many times before. This time, though, I was experiencing the waves with just a bit more freedom. I was choosing my words carefully, saying

neither too much nor too little. I was maintaining an honest presence that was neither more nor less than who I really am. All this felt new to me. I have had many such conversations before, but seldom have I experienced the same degree of freedom as when I was consciously watching my thoughts, guarding my heart, and practicing moderation.

In a single setting Laura had effectively integrated the three disciplines to maintain her poise. She had created just enough margin between herself and her situation to adjust the way she was responding, even while she was feeling uncomfortable. What is even more remarkable is that Laura was later able to describe how she found herself applying the disciplines in other areas of her life, paying closer attention to the nuances of grief and frustration she was experiencing, taking steps to shelter her soul and nurture her passions, and renegotiating her commitments to a more reasonable level.

The End Goal: Attentive to God's Presence

The true significance of Laura's example is not just that she achieved personal success or found a way to maintain her poise. She did back down from internal high alert and engage the most mature conversation she could have mustered given the circumstance. If we stop there, however, we have missed the greater point. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were not focused upon spiritual disciplines for the sake of self-development or efficiency, just as we do not pursue spiritual practices to become, ultimately, more comfortable in our lives and ministries. We engage these practices because they flow out of and into our foundational relationship with God.

There are two interconnected biblical ideals that galvanized the end goal for the early Desert monks. Without them as orienting principles, the sayings and disciplines fall flat. Drawing on the Beatitudes, the monks were convinced that the pure of heart shall see God (Matt 5:8) and, drawing on the epistles, the monks believed that they were called to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17). No doubt that purity of heart, seeing God, and ceaseless prayer sound somewhat impractical to our modern ears—and they might

even appear to test the bounds of moderation. Nonetheless, these paradigms did serve as the anchors that helped ancient Christians distinguish their way of life from the competing philosophies of the day. They ordered their lives toward these ends: that they might strive to pray ceaselessly and that, in doing so, their hearts would be purified so that they might see God more clearly. We dare not soften their underlying beliefs in an attempt to make them more palatable. These convictions help us understand what drove the monks to work so diligently in mapping out the ridges and valleys of the internal landscape, why they would seek out elders to listen to their thoughts and speak a helpful word, and how they could possibly persist in rigors of asceticism that make us blush today. In short, they believed it was possible for their lives to reflect full attentiveness to God.

Learning to pause and recollect ourselves in the heat of the moment is more than a survival tactic for life in ministry. Yes, it is helpful to become more aware of the thoughts that race down our mental expressways and more familiar with the closest exit ramps, but that is not the entire story. We must remain rooted in the convictions that undergird the Desert practices of watching our thoughts, guarding our hearts, and practicing moderation if we are to retrieve them with any integrity. These exercises of the spiritual life reflect a profound trust that God is present in all circumstances and that we possess a unique capacity to respond to God's invitations. It is no wonder that we want desperately to dismount from a state of hyper-distraction because it clouds our natural yearning to see the presence of God. Turning our attention toward that presence is an expression of faith and love that we practice our whole lives long. Benedict called it learning to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ" (RB 72.11).[6] With practice, we may find in those brief moments between stimulus and response a renewed and heartfelt focus. We may discover a hint of the genuineness and purity sought by the ancients. In that place a person is drawn by the love of God and overflows with service toward others.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What patterns are you noticing in your thoughts? How are these thoughts helpful? When are they unhelpful?

2. What is the single most important step you must take to guard your heart at this time?

3. Where does "not too high, not too low; not too much, not too little; not too often, not too infrequent" intersect with the way you are living your life?

Notes

[1] My thinking on these themes has been strongly influenced by my study with Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, and Fr. Columba Stewart, OSB. For more robust explanations than you will find here, see Funk's Matters Series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013). For an excellent study of one of Benedict's precursors and his contribution to this vein of spiritual theology, see Stewart's *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2] Benedicta Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, rev. ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1984), 234–35.

[3] Ibid., 180.

[4] Ibid., 179–80.

[5] Ibid., 3–4.

[6] Timothy Fry, ed., *RB1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

4

Intentionality

Choose Your Story

A minister recently told me that he caught himself telling a story that had spiraled well beyond the bounds of reality. He was working on a project that would need to be submitted for approval and, at the mere mention of one reviewer's name, he began spinning out scenarios until he had worked himself into a lather. Of course his proposal would be declined, he imagined, as he fueled his own frustration with the addition of one frustrating memory after another. He developed multiple approaches to the conflict that was sure to ensue, convinced that there would be a way to reverse the likely rejection or, if necessary, drive the project through. No stranger to the demands of community, he also plotted a clever (and mostly polite) way to mend the fences without truly giving ground. He found himself playing out this story in his mind for days—all before the proposal was even submitted.

Whenever two or more Christian leaders gather together, there is a risk that something similar might happen. For some reason we tend to assume a kind of liberating relief when we step outside the confines of the communities we serve and let loose with tales of frustration or exhaustion. "I just need to vent for a minute," we begin, but the story keeps growing and spinning faster, emboldened by the wide eyes and knowing nods of those who are listening. Soon the others chime in to add the momentum of their own variations on the same theme and, suddenly, the quick vent has morphed into elaborate and polarizing misinterpretations of true circumstances. Instead of being set free by the sharing, we now bear the burden of commiseration.

Commiseration too often results from telling stories to ourselves and to our peers in these less than life-giving ways. Maybe we hoped that venting a story would help us get something "off of our chest" or "out of our system," or that we would just find a little relief. There may well be appropriate times and places for virtuous forms of venting, but any lingering feeling of disappointment we might afterward experience serves as a signal that we have not yet found the story that gives us life and meaning. We remain out of touch with our most sincere vision. We have surrendered our awareness along with our best curiosities. We feel stuck in the middle of thoughts pulling in too many directions, leaving our hearts unguarded and our spirits exhausted by extremes. What we really need is a more useful narrative.

Peter Block, an author and consultant who specializes in fostering healthy change within communities, always begins his group processes with story. When he brings people together, he helps people tell their stories as a way to practice claiming and exercising their own unique voices. To hear the stories of another person is to encounter a singular perspective. We become connected and the space that takes form between us and around us becomes community in the best sense of the word. This mysterious process hinges on the possibility that we might each give voice to a story that we alone must tell. Block repeatedly asks, "What is the story that you hear yourself most often telling?"[1] This simple question invites us to consider how the stories we tell can empower or disempower, build up or tear down. In this chapter, with the help of some poets, we will practice shaping our stories more intentionally and choosing to contribute our unique and important voice to our communities.

Recognizing the Old Story

Block's question "What is the story that you hear yourself most often telling?" helps us pay better attention to the themes of an old story told often by those steeped in Christian leadership. The players and the settings change over time, and the nuanced variations are as many as there are individuals within countless communities, but the underlying structures of the plot are almost as common and

recognizable as the great hero myths of old: an individual is called out by God and infused with a vision of hope and possibility; following thoughtful consideration and significant preparation, that person sets out, committed enough to strive without promise of much worldly gain; mile after mile, some good is won, but once reality sets in, the hero ultimately grows tired from encountering challenges big and small. Unfortunately, the story seems to get stuck just about here. That chapter is where the pages become most worn and the binding most creased.

This is the place in the story when we hear ourselves persist in venting our anger, discouragement, or conflicts. We might find ourselves lamenting the many ways we are overworked, underpaid, or misunderstood. It is not at all uncommon for us to say in one way or another that our best intentions and visions for ministry are being thwarted by those around us. Moreover, we say, there is nothing we can do about it. When that old worn story surfaces in spiritual direction, whether I am speaking it myself or hearing it from another person, it tends to be connected with a yearning for strength enough to stand up and fight for what is rightfully ours: "By gum, I have been called to this ministry and I deserve to serve as I see fit." At this point whatever element of truth there may be to the notion of privilege and responsibility in being called to ministry has usually become buried under quite a lot of hurt. Unfortunately, the way we tell the old story does not often help us address that hurt effectively.

Telling the old story of ministry, however we have personalized it through years of repetition, is not helpful to us if what we are really looking for is life, vision, and vitality of ministry. There is no doubt that experienced Christian leaders have accumulated sufficient raw material to reinforce a "woe is me" theme, but that story tends to tear us down even further. It can increase anger, squeeze out curiosity and fragment community. All this disempowers us as Christian leaders.

To illustrate, we can compare the stories of two ministry leaders. The famous Welsh preacher Christmas Evans (d. 1838) reportedly said, "I'd rather burn out than rust out in the service of the Lord." At one time or another, we have all been duped by that theme in

some way or another, have we not? It has fed our frustration and hopelessness. That old story, camouflaged in piety and self-sacrifice, cleverly disregards any proper caution or responsibility for our long-term wellness as Christian leaders. A twentieth-century pastor, James D. Berkley, seemed to know this well when he countered,

> I admire the bravado. It sounds dedicated, bold, and stirring. However, when I view the burnt-outs and almost burnt-outs who lie by the ecclesiastical road, the glory fails to reach me. Is there not a third alternative? In Acts 20:24, Paul stated, 'I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.' Herein lies the model I choose to follow. I want neither to burn out nor rust out. I want to finish the race.[2]

The stories we tell affect our own wellbeing, the quality of our ministries, and the potential of our relationships. To finish the race we need stories that are robust enough to integrate our hurts and frustrations with our sense of calling and creativity. Since these themes wax and wane over time, we must seek out stories that have wide room for movement and change. The poets among us help us understand what we seek. Poets show us how to take a larger measure of responsibility for our own unique perspective. They write into and through one particular experience after another in order to model the call to turn toward life with greater honesty and attention. In the following excerpt from a prose poem called "The Life of a Day," we see Tom Hennen speaking to the difficulties we face in trying to maintain that kind of attentiveness to our lives:

> For some reason we want to see days pass, even though most of us claim we don't care to reach our last one for a long time. We examine each day before us with barely a glance and say, no, this isn't the one I've been looking for, and wait in a bored sort of way for the next, when, we are convinced, our lives will start for real. Meanwhile, this day is going by perfectly well adjusted.[3]

Hennen calls our attention to the layers of competing stories that might be at work within and around us, from the likely un-

conscious habit of pressing fast forward on life to the occasionally more conscious desire to slow down the steady march toward our end: "For some reason we want to see days pass, even though most of us claim we don't care to reach our last one for a long time." There is also a judgmental story within us that mercilessly assesses each moment, "no this isn't the one I've been looking for." That critical edge keeps us waiting for something better to come along. There is another related story that fantasizes disconnectedly about a day when "our lives will [finally] start for real." There is still one layer more. Beneath it all, there is a story that we hear as a magnificently calm and grounded testimony to the great gift of this moment: "Meanwhile, this day is going by perfectly well adjusted." In a matter of only a few verses, the poet has demonstrated how unhelpful stories can hinder the *real* life being lived today. No one wants to miss that story.

Finding a Wedge of Freedom

Freedom is the most extraordinary gift of God that comes to us in Christ and it is fundamental to the possibility of choosing our story. We spend our entire baptized lives exploring what it means to have been released from all that binds us, even as we continue to experience the effects of disappointment and adversity. Living daily within that tension, it is freedom that allows us to practice responding to God's impulse of love, while God continues to heal and set free. The potential fruit of this dynamic process is a growing sense of liberty that increasingly expresses itself in more wholesome service to others. In the process of becoming more intentional about the way we employ this precious gift of freedom, we are making and discovering our stories.

We do not, however, always *feel* free. The old persistent story can make us feel stuck. The judgmental, impatient, and unconscious grooves in our minds, which Hennen clearly named above, can become so well worn that constricting stories are the ones that come most easily. We have lost touch with our freedom. As we saw in earlier chapters, this challenge is consistent with what monastics have come to know through experience. Thoughts can rise, com-

pound and distract and yet the underlying mystery remains: God is present to us and calling to us, especially in the place of stuck-ness. In that place are planted the seeds of greater healing and the seeds of hope. Where old scripts are beginning to lose their power, we notice our spirits being drawn toward a new story. Where we detect that hunger for possibility, we find what the poet David Whyte calls "a wedge of freedom."[4]

The gift of God does not often come to us as a grand and complete solution for all that ails. Rather, it comes as a quiet and emerging capacity to say "yes" to something more. A wedge of freedom is something that takes hold so slightly that it is barely noticeable and yet can then be used to leverage even the smallest gap toward a larger opening. Here again we can appreciate the essential margin between our thoughts and our actions, where even a slim wedge of interior freedom can begin to bear fruit in our exterior lives. If we have set out to seek and to claim life-giving stories that better serve our sense of calling and purpose, we begin by looking for the wedge of freedom in our own lives. Whyte suggests that one such wedge is embracing our narrative as one of pilgrimage.

Fostering a Sense of Pilgrimage

Contrary to popular practice, stories about ministry do not have to rely on antagonists and the suspense of sure defeat. Whyte offers an alternative narrative through prose and poetry. In his book, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, he tells the story of work as a "pilgrimage of identity."[5] In other words, the work we do in ministry can help us discover more about ourselves and our passions through the process of contributing something unique to the world.

For ministry to be considered a pilgrimage—a process that we enter into and claim authentically—it is important that we submit to the possibility that who we are and who we are becoming is being revealed, at least in part, through the exercise of our calling as Christian leaders. This is something more than "that which does not kill us makes us stronger" or "chalk it up to formation." Consider the ways that the people and circumstances we encounter so often summon us to an expanded sense of soul and service. Looking back

on the discomforts we have experienced in ministry, we often find corresponding markers of inner transformation and openings in our lives that led to more effective forms of ministry. For this reason we are called to leave behind narratives of complaint and explore stories of integration, allowing our outer journeys to become more deeply connected with our interior ones.

The twentieth-century Trappist Thomas Merton talked about the "humble inner quest." Like Whyte, Merton offers us language for a more life-giving story when he writes about the connection between outer experience and inner journey: "The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both."[6] Stories told through the lens of pilgrimage hold the creative tension between what we are experiencing externally and what we observe happening within ourselves.

Women and men in ministry are not unlike the rest of the baptized. The things we experience day in and day out are the raw material for our inner quest, and if we do not integrate our interior journey with our outward one, our actions may actually cause ourselves and others more harm than good. We are, however, unlike the rest of the baptized to the degree that our faith communities and workplaces, as well as our spiritual themes and spiritual leaders, are so closely intertwined. Relationships are always a kind of refiner's fire, but add to them our expectations for the sacred, and we begin to appreciate how the layers of church interactions make for such supremely complex systems.

In my own life and ministry amid complex systems, the practice of spiritual direction has been a significant help in searching out and holding to the narrative of ministry as pilgrimage. Spiritual direction helps us look through the lens of experience to hone in on the wedge of freedom, focusing on the ways that God is stirring through particular situations and inviting us into a growing and more intimate relationship. These prayerful conversations help us move closer to the interior place of grace-filled freedom where we continue to learn the courage and persistence to keep stepping forward in our exterior circumstances. The confidence we find there

fosters our intentionality and clarifies our most genuine contribution as Christian leaders. That is the grounding we need to continue reaching out in ministry over the long haul, not "burning out for Jesus" but "finishing the race set before us." If spiritual direction does not immediately appeal to you, find a form of companionship that does. Your story of pilgrimage almost certainly depends on it. Such practices serve as cairns for the lifelong journey, a pilgrimage made up of what Whyte calls beginnings, crossings, and arrivals.[7]

Beginnings, Crossings, Arrivals

The beginnings within Christian life will always be anchored in water and the Word. We are each set on pilgrimage through the waters of baptism when we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed with the Holy Spirit. The baptized life that ensues is filled with whispered invitations, stirrings, and impulses of grace that invite us and empower us to live out of the presence of Christ within us. In light of our baptism, we set out each day anew, beginning again and again. This journey is not easy and it requires us to submit to the process of being formed. According to Whyte, "Any perspective is dearly won. Maturity and energy in our work is not granted freely to human beings but must be adventured and discovered, cultivated and earned. It is the result of application, dedication, an indispensable sense of humor, and above all a never-ending courageous conversation with ourselves, those with whom we work, and those whom we serve. It is a long journey; it calls on both the ardors of youth and the perspectives of a longer view. It is achieved through a lifelong pilgrimage."[8]

To take up this journey—and to keep taking it up—is an act of courage and hope that moves us to the edges of our known self. The long journey of formation to the mind of Christ, what Benedictines would call "conversion of life," requires a lifetime investment in conversations and relationships that help us integrate moments of triumph and defeat, and hold fast to the commitment to begin again. Whyte borrows from William Blake to describe the continual sharpening of one's commitment: "To have *firm persuasion*, to set out boldly in our work, is to make a pilgrimage of our labors, to

understand that the consummation of work lies not only in what we have done, but who we have become while accomplishing the task."[9]

The crossings help shape us along pilgrimage. Whyte envisions a ship setting out from one familiar coast, crossing over an unknown sea, and sailing toward a new and untamed destination. In between is openness and risk, much that is known, and even more that must be left to mystery. During the crossings we face the kinds of uncertainty and challenge that reveal the parts of ourselves that lack freedom. This means that we can be sure that there is something to be gained from pilgrimage, just as certainly as there is something to be lost. As Merton might say, what we are losing through the honest encounter with difficulty is the false self to which we have become accustomed. In the same vein, and encouraging the telling of a new story, Whyte entreats us to "remember ourselves and reimagine ourselves at the same time."[10]

Once we have set out from familiar shores, we must rely on whatever confidence we discovered along with an almost playful readiness to experiment with the person we are becoming. The risks we encounter during the crossings help us clarify who we are truly becoming beyond the simple sum of our history and beneath the accumulation of roles we have performed. In short, we gain freedom and find clarity about the unique and necessary gifts we bring to community. Whyte writes, "Freedom is perhaps the ultimate spiritual longing of an individual human being, but freedom is only really appreciated when it falls within the parameters of a larger sense of belonging. In freedom is the wish to belong to structure in our own particular way."[11]

Finding our own way to belong is one kind of arrival. The freedom that flows from growing clarity about our baptismal identity and calling reinvigorates us for service. "Our affections and loves will not be denied," Whyte urges, "but must find a home by being expressed in the world. [Ministry] is the ground of their arrival and ours too."[12] There will be moments in which we recognize our affections and loves being expressed through the exercise of Christian leadership, and we will taste the precious arrival of meaning and satisfaction. Alternatively, there will be moments when the life that

is emerging seems to press hard against our affections and loves. These, too, bring us some clarity. Upon those arrivals, it is all the more important to turn anew toward the inner journey, and to seek the new beginning.

Whyte cautions against the only true failure, which is to give up on the journey: "To die inside is to rob our outside life of any sense of arrival from that interior. Our work is to make ourselves visible in the world."[13] God calls us forward in freedom. We must keep finding our unique story and the ways we alone can tell it. As Whyte concludes, "This is the soul's individual journey, and the soul would much rather fail at its own life than succeed at someone else's."[14]

No one else can live the singular pilgrimage to which we each have been called. These are our interconnected beginnings, our crossings, and our arrivals. God continues to work intimately in us to bring healing and foster freedom beneath what others are able to see. Every element of our pilgrimage is leading us back to the present moment and to the reality that God is already meeting us here. Whyte offers this encouragement in a poem: "someone has written / something new . . . you are not leaving / you are arriving."[15] God's work, through our outer and inner journeys alike, helps us come home to the reality that, "By God's grace I am what I am" (RB Prol. 31). Benedict includes this assertion at the outset of the Rule as if to inspire the reader with hope and trust for what will inevitably be a long journey. Maybe your pilgrimage has involved aloneness, discouragement, uncertainty, poor health, or even the death of a loved one. Or, maybe you have found great joy in some things to celebrate. Whatever exterior path it is that you have walked, the inner journey continues to unfold. Today, as you are beginning, crossing and arriving by God's grace, you are what you are.

Exercising a New Intentionality

The old worn stories can impede our effectiveness as Christian leaders when we allow our frustrations and uncertainties to drive us away from our greatest joys and inspirations for ministry. Accompanied by a loving and creative God, we must come to know better the rich narrative of pilgrimage that is already underway. This

chapter closes with a reflective exercise built around a poem by David Whyte. It offers you a guided way to practice intentionality. Hopefully, it will help you refine your awareness of your own beginnings, crossings, and arrivals. You might discover both challenge and affirmation in the process. Whatever your response to the exercise might be, consider it welcome and useful to the degree that you are hearing yourself tell a more life-giving story.

Choosing Your Story: An Exercise

1. Set aside time and find a quiet place to listen for your wedge of freedom. Give yourself permission to linger.

2. Read the poem in its entirety. Read it aloud so you can hear the words. Pay attention to anything that strikes you.

3. Read the poem again slowly, beginning with stanzas one and two, then pause. *What are you experiencing that renews your attention?*

4. Read stanzas three and four. *What are you seeing that is most clear? What story has remained hidden for too long?*

5. Read stanzas five and six. *Where are you noticing an opening? What wedge of freedom lies in your own heart?*

6. Read stanzas seven and eight. *What is God inviting you to release? How is your old story being used to write the new?*

7. Read the last stanza. *What is it like for you to be arriving?*

The Journey[16]

by David Whyte

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again

painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything
has to be
enscribed across
the heavens

so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.

Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that

first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.

Sometimes with
the bones of the black
sticks left when the fire
has gone out

someone has written
something new
in the ashes
of your life.

You are not leaving,
even as the light
fades quickly now,
you are arriving.

Notes

[1] See Peter Block's *Community: The Structures of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).

[2] James D. Berkley, "Burning Out, Rusting Out or Holding Out?" *Leadership Journal* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1983), http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1983/winter/83l1036.html.

[3] Tom Hennen, *Darkness Sticks to Everything: Collected and New Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2013), 92.

[4] David Whyte, "The Journey," in *The House of Belonging* (Langley, WA: Many Rivers, 1997), 37.

[5] Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity* (New York: Riverhead, 2002).

[6] Thomas Merton, *Mystics & Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 92.

[7] These are adaptations from themes found in Whyte's *Crossing the Unknown Sea.*

[8] Whyte, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, 4.

[9] Ibid, 5.

[10] Ibid., 25.

[11] Ibid., 233.

[12] Ibid., 244.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Whyte, "The Journey," 37–38.

[16] Printed with permission from Many Rivers Press, www.davidwhyte.com. "The Journey," in *The House of Belonging* by David Whyte (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 1997), 37–38.

Perched in Conversation

The eagle chooses a perch with a sense of the larger purpose. There it waits and watches for moments of opportunity. Likewise, Christian leaders seek out new perspective, developing conviction, mutuality, and readiness for the exercise of community.

5

Conviction

Know Your Traditions

People who have set about the task of telling a new story do not start from scratch. We all draw upon the many influences that have brought us to this particular place and time as we practice interpreting our experiences with greater fluency. When I speak of traditions in this chapter, it is these various sources of influence to which I refer. In a broad sense, Christian Tradition encompasses a universal influence that we share and yet there is also room for a sense of traditions that helps us identify unique influences that shape an individual person or community. Traditions suggest customs, practices, or beliefs that can have a formative effect on us, that can be claimed personally or communally, and that can be passed on to future generations. We may not always be aware of the impact these influences have on our perspectives, but they are operative in and around us, nonetheless.

I was reminded of this one morning after a prayer breakfast with a large group of men. One gentleman asked me to address the group: "Say something more about the Benedictines." I told of the Sisters of St. Benedict of St. Paul's Monastery and their stories move from Germany to the Upper Midwest and, eventually, to St. Paul. I described the Sisters' ministries, as well as the possibilities and challenges before them at this stage of their journey together as a community. When I finished, he thanked me and then pressed further, "I guess what I mean to ask is *what does it do to you* to work for the Sisters?" That gave me pause and moved me to speak more deeply about my admiration for those who discover both the strength of their own convictions and the courage to order their lives

accordingly. This man's question helped me remember that being part of one community's monastic life was shaping me in ways I could never have predicted. Through the blessings and difficulties of working with these Benedictine women, I have been discovering my best self and the traditions that continue to influence me.

Many others have been similarly blessed by their connection to Benedictines. It is not infrequent for monastery guests to resonate with the practical monastic teachings about prayer and community. Christians often say that they have heard clearly that they *should* pray, but it is seldom that they have heard *how* to do so. For that reason, many of those who come to the monastery have, at one time or another, explored aspects of other religions that seem to better concretize meditation and wellness. It had been difficult, they say, to find those themes within Christianity. Many of the same people also express an appreciation for the way their encounter with Benedictine spirituality eventually pulled them back to their roots. The increasingly common practice of *lectio divina*, or sacred reading, is just one example of a renewed commitment to turn back toward Christian sources in hopes of finding fresh perspective for modern-day lives.

The instinct to turn back toward Christian sources is not new. One of the most well-known instances was seen through the Second Vatican Council, which has influenced much of modern theology. Two important themes of the Council, *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, inspired efforts to reclaim Christian sources as a matter of renewal in today's world. *Ressourcement* is a French word meaning, roughly translated, "returning to the sources." Scholars and theologians were intentionally reaching back, especially to the writings of the early church, and making those resources more widely available for study. The companion theme, *aggiornamento*, is an Italian phrase meaning "bringing up to date." According to theologians, the two disciplines of returning to the sources and bringing them up to date are dynamic parts of the same process. Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio describes the implications for theologians, building on insights from two significant twentieth century theologians, Yves Congar and Werner Förster: "It was an axiom of *ressourcement* theology that before becoming creative masters, theologians had first to be-

come attentive disciples. In other words, theology can only hope to be 'original' if it has first drunk deeply at the 'origins' of Christian life and thought. Congar, citing Werner Förster, asserts that 'only a profound understanding of the tradition can guide one to discern the useful elements in modernity, to select them with certainty, to adapt them with tact.'"[1]

The principles we learn from *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* related to the universal Christian Tradition are instructive in working with more nuanced kinds of traditions. These principles discourage haphazard harvesting of ancient wisdom, just as they resist the uncritical adaptation of the most modern ideas. Learning our traditions involves the intentional process of reaching back in order to understand something within its own context and building a careful bridge into the present. Knowing our traditions enables us to engage the never ending process of discovering our treasures and crafting faithful applications for our times. Again, "only a profound understanding of the tradition can guide one to discern the useful elements in modernity, to select them with certainty, to adapt them with tact." There are many traditions we would be wise to know, but this chapter focuses upon four that Christian leaders are compelled to learn: Scripture, theology, institutional narrative, and personal history. Scripture and theology fall neatly within the broader Christian tradition, while the traditions of institutional narrative and personal history have a slightly different character. We will explore these four and at least one example.

Scripture

The Reverend Peter Rogness, who presided as Bishop over the St. Paul Area Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America from 2002 to 2014, often demonstrates a fine pastoral commitment to the biblical tradition through his preaching. Knowing that listeners have varying degrees of familiarity with the basic sequence of biblical events, Pastor Rogness regularly begins his homilies with a brief survey of the narrative's wider context. When preaching about the Old Testament, for example, he traces the broad strokes of the frequently contentious relationship between

God and God's people, beginning with Genesis and moving through the Pentateuch into the historical books, Writings, and Prophets, always moving toward the coming of Christ. His survey demonstrates that the promises of God continue to shine through the unfolding narrative: the people are faithful, the people fall away, and the people are drawn back to God. Pastor Rogness's homilies are then consistently tied to whatever text is at hand, always in service of proclaiming the Gospel.

In helping listeners locate a particular reading within the larger biblical narrative, Pastor Rogness offers people a better framework for understanding the day's reading. Then and only then does he turn to help listeners reflect on the implications for daily life. Not only is that an example of fine hermeneutics, it is also a model for pastoral preaching. A good preacher meets people where they are and, one homily at a time, leads them toward a richer understanding of the God made known through Scriptures. There is no doubt that the capacity to hold open such an important space for others is grounded in a preacher's own understanding of the Scriptures, an understanding that is shaped through training, naturally, and also a lifetime of prayer. Karl Barth is said to have remarked that those who preach should do so with the Scriptures in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That prayerful discipline is important for any Christian leader. We must come to know the Scriptures more and more deeply because they bear trusted witness to the universal Christian tradition, along with the symbols and stories the people of God have employed throughout the ages to describe the promises and mysteries of our God. Simultaneously, we must remain attentive to the world around us so that we may continue to discern how best to live out Gospel values.

Those who have accompanied the dying are sure to have encountered an incredible grace in persons for whom Scripture and song persist long past their memory of other things. They continue to respond to those familiar words even when they cannot otherwise speak. That is why we read psalms and sing hymns at deathbeds, because some part of our souls are able to resonate even beyond the capacities of our bodies. Over a lifetime of liturgy and prayer, the word of God works its way into our marrow. It becomes the

language we have absorbed through every sacramental act and every expression of communal grief and joy along life's many passages. As beautiful as this is to see in older generations, there seems to be a danger today that younger generations will reach their own deathbeds without those Scriptures deep within. It is not enough for us to hear the text occasionally, sometimes from one translation and sometimes from another. Like Ezekiel we must eat the scroll (Ezek 3:1). We must become leaders who help others take in the Scriptures and carry that tradition into the world.

Theology

Hymns, like Scripture, are important to the soul's memory. They bear the attempts of artists and theologians to reach back into the Christian Tradition and speak into the present in ways that move us and form us for life. The best among them strive to combine substantial reflection with melodies that enable all to participate fully. Sometimes those hymns linger as we leave celebrations and find ourselves humming a tune or singing a few lines to ourselves. Songs, symbols, and rituals all provide an interpretive function, pointing to what we believe theologically and helping us experience something intuitively even before or after we might be aware of it cognitively. They are teaching tools in the sense that we learn a theological tradition through them.

If we can appreciate the potential power of these teaching tools in our formation, then we can also begin to understand the level of trust that we are placing in those who shape them. A sound theological tradition requires scholars and theologians who immerse themselves in centuries of insight and conversation that no one person can master alone. Then they must press forward, asking what it all means within the context of culture and current events. Theologians ask questions, propose ideas, and debate one another in an effort to refine the ways we speak into our present context with theological grounding. This is no easy task and not many of us are called to that particular life or discipline, yet we do not stand idly by.

A sound theological tradition is not the responsibility of scholars alone. Christian leaders read and reflect in order to gather people

together for meaningful conversations. Those exchanges may not directly influence reforms of the liturgy or official church documents, but they have a tremendously valuable place in the church. They familiarize themselves with theology in order to create ministries, liturgies, curriculums, and more. Others bring theology to life in the world outside of Christian communities. These faithful people become involved in conversations with those who are suffering or afraid, joyful or constrained, finding ways to explore how God might be present in any experience. It is important for each of us, whatever our station and calling, to know our theological tradition so that it may inform our unique forms of service.

None of this is to say that we receive and transmit theology uncritically. What enables a tradition to endure through the centuries is ongoing interaction within the Body of Christ. Wherever our lives call us to serve, we encounter stories and experiences that drive us back to the Scriptures and to the teachings of the church seeking to understand what they might mean. On occasion, those experiences challenge what we find and feed the momentum to reform an aspect of our theology that no longer reflects the fullness of what we have come to believe. Theology does not start over with each successive generation, nor is it passed on as a carbon copy. Theology is an open-ended question that thrives on our participation in the conversation. As we become engaged, we notice that every generation has wrestled with singular variations of familiar questions about grace, freedom, responsibility, divinity, humanity, suffering, hope, and communities that die and start anew. We need the language of theology to enter into and sustain the conversation.

Institutional Narrative

Under the umbrella of the church there are countless smaller institutions, each with their own unique combinations of influences. Institutions may differ in taking the form of communities, organizations, marriages, or other structures, but they share in common the reality that their narratives express a particular intersection of complex human relationships. No two institutional narratives are exactly alike because the precise mix of human relationships can never be

duplicated. If each person can be understood to represent a single point among generations of relationships, imagine the multitude of influences brought into play when people are gathered together in community. It is no wonder that we have difficulty navigating institutions made up of tens and hundreds of dense and intersecting webs of relationships. Learning to disagree, communicate, and collaborate within unique institutional contexts all become part of moderating the different perspectives that are sure to be found.

While it is tempting to grumble about institutions as if they were entities unto themselves, it may be more productive to think of them as clusters of intersecting and imperfect systems. A saying sometimes attributed to Plato or Philo of Alexandria offers sound advice: "Be kind. Everyone is fighting a great battle." When we can step back and appreciate that the individuals we encounter inside an institution cannot completely hide their struggle to manage their own life and relationships, we may find a greater degree of patience. And when we can acknowledge that we, too, carry the effects of a mighty struggle to manage our own systems, the human dimensions of the institution comes more clearly into view. This humanizing perspective helps us reclaim the power of our influence—the power to become more conscious of our motivations and our responsibility for contributing well to the relationships that make up the institutions we serve.

Hugh Heclo, professor of public affairs at George Mason University, writes persuasively about the need to change the way we perceive institutions and the way we function within them. He calls for a shift from "thinking about institutions" to "thinking institutionally." Heclo is not naïve about the modern dissatisfaction with institutions. Even so, he argues that we must "distrust but value" institutions, looking forward in light of the past and striving to carry the best of institutions into the future. In order to move forward, according to Heclo, we must cultivate a way of thinking that allows us to receive something of value from the institution and then draw upon it as a source for innovation. That movement from receiving to innovating is part of living in a committed way. To illustrate this aspect of thinking institutionally, Heclo draws on the ancient Roman concept of "usufruct." He writes:

> To be constrained in the present by partaking of the fruits of what belongs to predecessors and successors has a venerable legal name, so venerable that it is traceable back to pre-Christian Roman law. The term is "usufruct." It refers to the right to make full use of something while also being under the obligation to pass on intact, without injury, the substance of the thing itself. It is the tenant's right to enjoy as well as the tenant's responsibility to protect an asset belonging to others. Pick and profit from the fruit of the orchard, but make sure the orchard's trees are there for the next tenant to enjoy.[2]

What fruit do we find in the orchards we now inhabit? In what ways are we claiming responsibility for protecting the orchard for the next tenants? Learning to think institutionally is coming to locate ourselves within the narrative of a particular collection of relationships with a unique past and future that may well span generations beyond our own. We need to find the value in the institutional narrative we have inherited so that we may shape the legacy we pass on to others.

Personal History

Communities assume that Christian leaders are sufficiently prepared with a sense of tradition shaped by Scripture and theology. They can also reasonably expect that their leaders have been taught to function well within the unique dynamics of a particular institutional context. What sets apart Christian leaders with enduring ministries, however, is the willingness to attend to one's personal history, which is, in fact, another kind of tradition. This is where people examine how they have come, through relationships and experience, to possess certain strengths, weaknesses, and patterns of perception and behavior. In paying close attention to the themes that have influenced them personally, they learn to claim responsibility for themselves, to continue doing their own work, and to practice exercising authentic freedom. This takes a lifetime of work because the influences that permeate our attitudes and behaviors can sometimes be subtle.

Permit me a story or two to illustrate. Not long ago I became interested in researching my own family of origin, particularly the less-than-intuitive pronunciation of our last name. A handful of dates and names here, a second cousin's record there, and a story or two that were mostly true helped me track back three generations. My great-great-grandfather, August F. Rehberg, eluded me for a time until I sleuthed out his name on the manifest of the SS *Kaetie*, which set sail from Stettin, Germany, and arrived in Castle Garden, New York, on May 8, 1882. As excited as I was about the discovery, including a painting of the ship from 1885, what touched me most was the insight it offered into something I had once been pondering. For some time I had been trying to put my finger on why I might have felt especially out of place when we first joined our home parish. The people have always been endearing, yet I had still noticed the extra, albeit occasional, outsider's twinge. Finding my great-great-grandfather reminded me that for well over one hundred years, my family has participated in faith communities with some link to German heritage. In contrast, the stained glass of our home parish today is marked with Scripture written in Norwegian. Especially early on, the jokes about lutefisk and sweaters sometimes seemed to belong to a people who were not mine. I can only imagine what it might have been like for my fellow members who first came from Cambodia or Eritrea. Even for me, despite the passing of four generations, something in my genetic code persists to suggest that part of who I am is greatly informed by my German descent.

The intuitive sense of identity that I found rooted in my family history is something common to us all. A friend of mine and his wife adopted a child when the boy was five years old. The mother had died long before and when the father became terminally ill with cancer, he asked this couple to become guardians for the boy. In the brief window of time before this father died, my friend and his wife took the child on a visit to Minnesota's North Shore to begin acclimating him to the new relationship. They camped together near Duluth together and, in doing so, seem to have etched something powerful into the boy's memory. The young boy grew up and eventually decided to attend college in Duluth. He insisted it

was not because of the landscape or the academic program. There was just something inexplicable about the place that had always remained important to him. Perhaps something sacred took root in him during the first visit to Duluth while he was experiencing an intense transition between endings and new beginnings.

The powerful influences of our personal experiences within unique relationships has been studied much by experts. Family systems theory, as one example, calls our attention to the ways that the relationships within our families of origin influence our perspectives, expectations, and behaviors—whether or not we are attentive to them. Our task as ever-maturing adults is to use the tools of reflection and conversation to become increasingly conscious of those influences. In short, when we are driven by assumptions and motivations that operate unconsciously, we have less freedom in our relationships. To become more conscious, we can explore language and frameworks that help us take a closer look at how we respond to stress, conflict, anxiety, as well as the stories that shape our values and motivations. Therapy can be especially useful for developing the skills and confidence to notice and examine the patterns of behavior that we have learned, and to begin adjusting those that no longer serve us well. The act of pursuing questions related to our own histories helps us better appreciate how the legacies of our personal identity and meaning are operative for us in the present, and it also helps us be more intentional about the ways we extend those legacies into the future. Better awareness of our own heritage and formative experiences, whether they be of German parishes or childhood memories of special places, prepares us to relate in more healthy ways to women and men with their own unique personal traditions.

Weaving the Four Traditions

Coming to know our multifaceted tradition as Christian leaders is one of the most satisfying arts and sciences of ministry. Essentially, we are entrusted with the adventure of clarifying our personal and shared convictions in ways that allow us to help others step forward together in mission. The process can be enlivening when it works well, as we discovered in creating the School of Lectio Divina.[3] The

School is an intensive retreat focused on the practice of praying the Scriptures. Small cohorts engage in times of teaching, prayer, quiet reflection, and spiritual direction as they explore ancient monastic teachings, contemporary theology, and the Benedictine interplay of solitude and community.

The School has become an expression of who we are at the deepest level and that would not have been possible without attention to the four areas of tradition we have explored. The flow and content has been richly informed by an understanding of Scripture, theological beliefs, and the narrative of a particular monastic institution. The integrity of the process has relied upon the ongoing commitment of a core group of Christian leaders who are serious about their own unique journeys. They are attentive to what influences them personally and proactive about their own ongoing formation. Only in that light can they accompany others.

Knowing your unique traditions equips a person to participate more fully in developing as an individual and as a leader. Without groundedness in Scripture and theology, or lacking a sense of our own history within the context of the broader institutional memory, we cannot effectively assess where we are, nor can we articulate where we are going. Leaders must be fluent in the language of an institution's mission and, especially given our religious contexts, that mission must remain profoundly shaped by Scripture and theology. Those who are comfortable with the themes of their own personal history will more quickly identify unhealthy patterns and adjust assumptions in ways that help address interpersonal pressures. Understanding all this enables us to better advocate for the people we lead and the missions we serve. It is in paying attention to our traditions that we remain close to the heart of who we are, a discipline that remains essential as long as we strive to bridge the gap between the generations before us and the generations that will come after. Will we stand on the shoulders of giants only skimming the fruit from the highest branches? Certainly we have inherited the right to enjoy what we have received, yet it will always remain important that we climb down on occasion, like others before us, and tend these traditions for the sake of future generations.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What role does Scripture play in your sense of tradition?
2. What are the bedrock theological principles by which you live?
3. How is the heritage of the institution you serve affecting the decisions being made about ministry in these times?
4. What aspects of your own family dynamics are being played out in your approach to leadership, conflict, and communication?

Notes

[1] Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition," *Communio* 18.4 (Winter 1991): 530–55.

[2] Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally*, On Politics (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008), 110.

[3] I have written elsewhere about the School of Lectio Divina as an innovation that embodies a vision for future ministry through the Benedictine Center of St. Paul's Monastery, but it is worth revisiting here as an example of what is possible when Christian leaders know their traditions well. The School of Lectio Divina was developed by a team of Benedictine Center staff members and advisors in cooperation with Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, OSB, author and former prioress of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, along with Dr. Kathleen Cahalan, Professor of Theology at Saint John's School of Theology•Seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota. See Samuel Rahberg, "Leaning into the Future: A Study of the Benedictine Center of St. Paul's Monastery," *American Benedictine Review* 65, no. 1 (March 2014): 68–93.

6

Mutuality

Share Your Power

The most spectacular symbols and well-intentioned commitments we find in our traditions are of transitory value until they are translated into real practice. When they are brought to life through actions and decisions, entire communities become revitalized. In other words, what we see and believe about our mission will be tested by the quality of our acting upon those values and fulfilling those promises every day. Decisions that fail to reflect the mission will chip away at mutual trust, respect, and commitment. Decisions that further the mission by marshalling people's gifts will maximize energy and creativity in ways that exceed the capacities of any one person alone.

We all have our examples of golden moments of collaboration when we enjoyed the pleasurable challenge of working in concert with other talented people toward excellent ministry. Pat MacMillan, an author who writes for organizations about strategies for cultivating that kind of excellence, reserves his highest praise for teams that have "a special spirit or sense of confidence, belonging, and commitment. Such a group shares common goals and achieves results well beyond their individual abilities. . . . Their relationships are characterized by high levels of acceptance, respect, and trust."[1] Christian leaders, like anyone pursuing a life's work, long to be associated with mutually encouraging teams like these. Such teams do not simply appear; they are cultivated and empowered in complex situations by deliberate leaders. MacMillan also writes: "In a world of discontinuous change, organizational survival and success rest on the organization's ability to develop and deploy two essential elements: exceptional leadership

and high performance teamwork. . . . When organizations are able to successfully blend the power of leadership and team they will experience what we call the *Performance Factor*."[2]

MacMillan argues that most teams have a fundamental desire to succeed. By nature they want to improve their capacities so that they can accomplish something extraordinary together. Good leadership—exceptional leadership—is key to helping teams experience the performance factor, the mighty dynamic marked by "results that exceed the effort or input that produced them."[3] This synergy emerges over time in proportion to the team's growing confidence and clarity about their work together. High performance teamwork can make the most daunting task appear smooth and effortless. There is a sense of unity and grace, but that apparent effortlessness is rooted in real, mutual empowerment. To enhance the performance factor of our teams, we need to begin with a closer look at the power of our leadership.

Christian leaders may not always be in a position to determine what upper echelons of organizations choose to develop and deploy, but we can and must claim responsibility for the way we ourselves cultivate and exercise the power of our leadership within the teams we serve. The best form of advocacy for others is learning to leverage our own strengths, experience, and influence to raise up those around us. Exceptional leaders enable every member of the team to help accomplish the common vision. They facilitate actions that sharpen the mission and collaborate toward its execution because they believe that the call to service belongs to each person equally. The unique privilege of any positional authority is sharing power in ways that allow a clear vision to become more real. That kind of power, exercised honestly within the context of Christian community, can have exponential effect. This chapter reflects three interconnected aspects of power: its nature, its exercise, and its effects.

Nature of Power within Community

There is a theological dimension to the idea of power within Christian community that leans heavily on the conviction that God is its true source and that the church benefits from defined roles and

structures of authority that communicate that idea clearly. Scripture has informed the church's teachings on power and we have become familiar with its expression through bishops, pastors, teachers, and others. We will leave the work of articulating the finer aspects of that positional power to the systematic theologians. For our purposes here, as we assist ministers in shaping a more sustainable sense of leadership and empowerment, we will take as our primary focus the comparatively untamed and more elemental nature of power within the seat of human interaction. There we witness how the movement of power between and through people gives life to God's mission in the world. Positional power alone is insufficient, especially when it is reduced to a delivery system by those who seem more powerful or dissuades action on the part of those who seem less so. Lasting and effective power, in contrast, is both relational and experiential.

Power Is Relational

We have all met people who fascinate us with their deep authority, evidenced by a sense of inner conviction and groundedness. Sometimes these traits appear in the highly skilled elite, but the more captivating examples are found in humble men and women who ask good questions and speak few words, usually after having given their ideas plenty of time to percolate. These powerful people are not given to complaint nor are they enamored with credentials or prestige. They act with respect for others and sometimes defer, but we dare not mistake their quiet and relaxed presence for weakness. Try to push them from above or bait them with something too sweet and you will soon find a bulwark of steel. Their strength is in knowing themselves and doing the next thing that needs to be done. This is a durable kind of power.

These icons of inner strength demonstrate an authenticity that has been formed slowly over time. The quality of their presence suggests that they do not expend energy trying to be anything other than who they really are. Unlike those who say, "If you cannot dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with blather," these women and men have learned to interact with the world and other people without showmanship, practicing watchfulness and integrity. Like hearty farmers

subject to the sobering realities of weather and market fluctuations, these women and men have found their bearings within a world outside of their control. They may not rush to articulate grand visions or to assume prominent forms of leadership, but something deep within does guide them. Every Christian leader is called to cultivate a similar sense of rootedness and authenticity from which to serve.

Service is the quality control mechanism for relational power. True authority is recognized and communicated as it is shared with others through acts of loving-kindness. Those who yoke what they know about themselves with what they recognize needs to be done are able to inspire trust and confidence. They demonstrate an applied humility for the benefit of others, connecting their own personal agency with care for the common good. More often than not, people genuinely want to make a difference. They want to be good at what they do and know that they are part of something meaningful. The art of relational power, therefore, is nurturing a shared understanding of what that common good might look like while continuing to develop each person's capacity for and commitment to that vision. Leadership roles and positions may help that process, but an influence marked by trust and mutuality is of even greater importance. In that sense, anyone who is actively empowering people and cultivating shared vision is exercising good relational power. The art of relational power is fostering the courage of conviction that is already present in strong people, and orchestrating commitments to a shared mission that is so solid that faithful people going about their everyday tasks are able to recognize their own indispensable contribution.

Power Is Experiential

The accumulation of power is a bit like building up a static charge. We have all been surprised at some point when we touch another person or grasp a metal doorknob and catch a quick zap. The electricity is unmistakable and, in hindsight, we might realize where it came from. One step, nearly unnoticeable after the next, managed to combine shuffled feet with fuzzy carpet and load our bodies with an electric charge. Its presence was impossible to see until it was discharged through a tiny arc of energy from one point to another. Sometimes

we are caught off guard and apologize, and most often we share a laugh about the experience. Consider for a moment how power in and for ministry might manifest in a similar way. Notice how power is more often something we experience than something we possess. Perhaps with an understanding of physics and proper controls, we might devise the means to store kinetic energy and dispense power at will. Modern society depends on predictable energy, after all. But there is an essential and humbling aspect to the unexpectedness of a static charge that offers us a healthy perspective for ministry. Power for ministry is not reserved in batteries or dispensed with the flip of a switch. It is far more relational. Real power is transacted between people or released from them like an unexpected spark. Walking side by side as conductors, we are surprised every once in a while by a jolt that is not fundamentally of our own making nor entirely under our control. What we learn from day-to-day interactions is that the most impressive and moving forms of power flow from God through community. One experience charges another, and soon these moments that helped us acknowledge God's power in our midst become the stories of surprise and joy, of deliverance and thanksgiving, that compile a community's Spirit-filled narrative.

A number of years ago I watched power emerge, not from positional authority, but from the even more impressive ground of mission clarity. As the director of our ministry team, I had been informed of a decision that would clearly hinder our ability to extend hospitality to those outside of the monastery. There seemed to be no alternative, according to those who made the decision, so I gathered our team together to consider some possible responses. The first and weakest option would have been to write a protest, expressing our sense of how this decision would undercut the mission. That statement might have been a sufficient tip of the hat to responsibility, but it would not likely have inspired a change in the decision. Instead, the team chose another option. The monastic members of the team elected to go themselves to those who made the decision and invite a more personal conversation. Sparks flew in a good way. Together face to face, these Sisters gave voice to differing perspectives until they found a better alternative. Even more significantly, members from all sides discovered the power of mutual listening and problem

solving that was accomplished that day. In this case, the most effective power did not flow from top down through predictable channels of authority, but emerged from among those who were clear about a mission and courageous enough to talk through the implications together. Potent experiences like these strengthen the shared story of ministry. One interaction combines with another to have a compounding effect on a team's sense of power and assurance in relating to one another. This increases the degree of confidence that people share about shepherding a ministry, and some days it may even smell like lightening. A handful of people, given the opportunity to speak their inner conviction, can conduct surprising power and strengthen a ministry for years to come.

The Exercise of True Power

The relational and experiential dimensions of power do not relieve a Christian leader of responsibility. Sharing your power is not fundamentally about delegating responsibility. Rather, it is exercising whatever degree of influence we possess in ways that help unleash the latent potential within a system. If we attend to the fact that power animates human connections and is experienced most fully in the midst of everyday interactions, then there is less danger that we will abuse the privilege of our positions or the people and resources around us. We focus instead on employing our power for those functions that best advance the mission we share. For leaders in ministry, these responsibilities are exercised in convening conversation, saying yes and no purposefully, and continuing to extend the invitation to dialogue.

Convene Conversation

One of my mentors and friends has taught me much about the importance of convening conversations. As an expert in adult education and a practiced consultant to ministers and organizations, Victor Klimoski knows how to introduce the feel of possibility into a room. For decades he has shared his creative power as a poet to call people together and mine interesting veins of conversation. Whether he is gathering leaders of religious or secular communities,

he maintains that curiosity and mutual inquiry are transformative. Time after time I have seen him enable people to engage problems with fresh perspective. Whatever the range of expertise, he insists on only one prerequisite—the commitment to give voice to one's own unique perspective. This dedication to draw people together, to prepare processes, and to build mutuality is a model for leadership in these times. There will always be a place for instruction and education, but real power lies in opening inquiries that inspire people to explore unknown spaces together. Entering ambiguity mutually and finding ways forward have become basic survival skills for our times, making poetry, beauty, and reflection the tools of choice. Even when the impetus for such reflections arises out of some less than ideal circumstance, the value of coming together surpasses mere problem solving when people practice meaningful conversation. Leaders exercise true power when they notice an opportunity to convene a conversation, welcome a broad range of perspectives, and shape processes that are truly conducive to mutual inquiry.

Say No

For most of us it is easier to say "yes" than "no," so let us begin with the potentially more difficult response. What makes saying "no" tough is the fear that we might disappoint the person who is asking something of us. Although we might want to answer every call for support or leverage our every resource to ease the difficulties of others, it is simply not realistic. It is not possible to say "yes" all the time, but that does not mean that "no" is merely applied at the fringes. We need not dwell in fear, limits, and deficiencies to find our "no" because it is actually more dependent upon courage and focus. For ourselves and our team members alike, saying "no" is exercising power for the integrity of a mission. We practice letting things go as individuals and teams in order to preserve our very best energies for those things that we continue to learn are central to the mission before us. Do not imagine that there is an easy distinction between administrative tasks and relational work as if "real ministry" were simply one or the other. All aspects of ministry require our faithful "no." We say "no" when we limit our scale of ministry

to what is sustainable, when we refuse to murmur, when we hold each other accountable to boundaries, and when we chose not to overcompensate for others. Saying "no" is a discipline precisely because it is often difficult to distinguish which particular activities are essential to the mission and which are a distraction. Each decision must be respected as a careful pruning toward a healthier mission. Sometimes we might cut too close and miss an opportunity. When that happens, Christian leaders will be ready to better appreciate their next "yes."

Say Yes

Saying "yes" can be as invigorating as a well-placed "no." Whether it follows an uncomfortable period of discernment or slips easily across our lips, "yes" makes visible the freedom in our choosing. At its best, a "yes" is an authentic response to a perceived need. It is claiming, "This is who we are; we agree that this is our shared purpose." A "yes" can appear like a green light for a team already on the move or like an opening door for a team that has long been waiting. A wholehearted "yes" has the potential to feed creative energy and motivate team members to commit their own best gifts in a shared pursuit of a common goal. Whenever possible, we search for our "yes-es" together as a team in order to maximize the sense of energy and alignment. From time to time, the decision will fall to us as leaders by virtue of our position or our responsibilities, and we are then called to engage that moment as an exercise of genuine power. Those decisions are opportunities to convey our belief that our team is being called to something purposeful. We say "yes" when we encourage people to run with an idea, when we affirm people for speaking up even when there is disagreement, when we do something difficult because we believe it is important, and when we can rest comfortably at night knowing we were as faithful to the mission this day as possible. There will always be times when our "yes" is more tentative than we might like or more challenging than we might prefer. On those days we lean all the more heavily on the grace of God and pay especially close attention to the lessons that the experience holds.

Keep Inviting

The hazards of leadership include the very real possibility that our best intentioned "yes" or "no" might occasionally be misplaced or met with resistance at times and, rather than advance the mission as we might have hoped, actually become a detriment to our relationships. Left to fester, those moments might amount to negative experiences of power that carry the potential to damage the shared commitment to ministry. The Christian leader who exercises true power, however, keeps inviting people back into dialogue. This is a continual return to the interiorly solid and humble groundedness we recognize to be our most authentic authority. No matter what befalls us in a day, whether a mistake belongs to us or to someone else, we are called to keep turning back toward the people we serve and the mission we share. We return to what we believe most deeply and search for the next faithful step forward. When we admit our failings and, in the best of circumstances, discuss them together, we are modeling something important. Learning from difficulty then becomes yet one more way of living out the mission, as we refine that vision through the grist of everyday life and harvest lessons that might lead to a more effective future. People might choose to snub our invitations to what we believe to be important conversations. When we ourselves have received a "no," it is important to respect that answer as fully as a "yes" out of the conviction that either answer can be an equal exercise of authentic freedom. We demonstrate radical hospitality in receiving a "no" gracefully, thereby preserving the possibility of extending the invitation again in the future.

Effects of Shared Power

If any of these practices of true power sound familiar, it is either because we recognize the common sense of relational influence or because leaders we admire have taught us these lessons by their example. As we exercise leadership, we cannot escape the voices of those who have spoken their wisdom into our lives by inviting us to embrace a larger vision. Peter Block, whom we have met before, is one such voice. He is an author and consultant who works with communities to transform their sense of power. Using story,

hospitality, and a radical respect for potential, Block and his colleagues have worked for decades to help revitalize neighborhoods and communities from the bottom up. Essentially, Block coaches people in the process of sharing power.[4]

Block lays the foundation for change upon his conviction that fragmented communities are crippled in their effectiveness. They do not need quick-fixes, new gadgets, and expert recommendations. He argues that what communities really need is a renewed sense of belonging and that authentic connection requires carefulness about structure. These are not the structures of hierarchical authority, but revived attention to every aspect of the way we gather people together. Our gatherings must help people practice exercising their freedom to receive or decline an invitation, to speak from their own expertise, to stop blaming, and to start claiming responsibility for their part in achieving something so important it can only be accomplished together. On a very practical level, Block encourages the use of poetry and music and art to evoke a creative atmosphere. The room should be arranged in circles of three chairs so that the elements of conversation, both speaking and listening, are emphasized at the ground level. The process itself should be built not upon instruction, but mutual inquiry. Open-ended and challenging questions, then, are the most essential ingredient.

Block talks about creating a space for power to emerge and be recognized, and the primary responsibility of the leader is to shepherd the structure that best supports that process. In a context like this, convening the conversation, saying "no" and "yes," and continuing to extend invitations help cultivate a new and powerful culture in which people can discover and claim solutions together. The potential exists for us to stop waiting and watching for someone else to swoop in and save the day. As the poet June Jordan wrote, "We are the ones we have been waiting for." We can stop telling ourselves the story, "There's nothing left to be done about it. We are not the ones in charge." Block likes to say that truly shared power, made visible when someone speaks their "yes" into a room, is like lightning striking indoors. Leaders and structures can help create openings, but people claiming shared power is electrifying.

The motivations for sharing power cannot be reduced to utilitarian efficiencies or an increased number of confident lieutenants in the trenches. Genuine power nurtures an atmosphere of liveliness and alignment around a common and compelling mission. Christian leaders have the unique privilege of activating the gifts and passions in others that are already begging to be released. Very likely, we are simply returning the favor. Someone along the way encouraged and empowered us or we would not have said "yes" to a life in ministry. Some mentor or wise friend demonstrated authenticity and conviction while helping us recognize our sense of belonging and purpose. In doing so they shared their power with us and leveraged what they had learned and experienced in order to open a door in our lives. We have become conduits for a charge that has been passed down through our mentors and from their mentors before them. Theologically speaking, we exercise whatever degree of influence we enjoy because someone had faith enough to help us see who we are in God's sight and what good might be accomplished in a community through us. Galatians 2:20 reads, "Yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." The paradigm of power in Christian community roots the electrifying life of possibility in the mysterious indwelling of Christ. This power is not ours to hoard or abuse; it is an abundant gift for generations to share.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. How has God used the generosity of others to empower you for ministry?
2. What conversation are you feeling called to convene?
3. What "yes" and "no" are waiting to be spoken?
4. What invitation do you need to extend again?

Notes

[1] Pat MacMillan, *The Performance Factor: Unlocking the Secrets of Teamwork* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 14.

[2] Ibid., xiv.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Hoehler, 2009).

7

Readiness

Plan for Flexibility

Like parishes and nonprofits all over the globe, there are many daunting challenges facing Benedictine retreat centers. Visit a monastery on nearly any continent and you will encounter faithful men and women who are striving to imagine the future of monastic life, maintain outdated facilities, and manage the financial costs of continuing to live and do ministry in the world. These issues are all significant, but leaders in Benedictine houses will tell you that it is more often the subtle frustrations that pose the greatest challenges to the wellbeing of communities and ministries. It requires a substantial commitment for monastics to continue reaching outward day after day, year after year. More often than not, there will be guests in the chapel, at the meals, and wandering toward the cookie jar in the middle of the night. Any one of them could potentially cause a stir. Someone will show up late for a meal, even if the estimated meal count was finally accurate. A man will lose his key while a lady stains a washcloth with makeup or forgets her electrical cord in the guest room. The new group will read a little too fast at Morning Prayer and even those who know better will laugh a little too loudly at lunch. The phone will ring and it will be a person who needs far more than a quick conversation about making a reservation or setting up a retreat. These are the small things, little more than minor inconveniences, which do not often factor into grand conversations about mission and ministry. They do, however, threaten to accumulate and peck away at corporate goodwill unless we find ways to make room for those things that do not seem to go according to plan.

Vibrant communities cultivate flexibility. In the previous chapter we considered the practice of sharing our power so that others might better engage ministry in their own unique ways, but power is of little value unless it can be applied wisely and in a timely way. For ministries to thrive, leaders need to help teams practice adapting even while navigating the inescapable and everyday inconveniences. Bob Johansen, writing in *Leaders Make the Future,* argues that traditional leadership skills will be insufficient for the demands of the coming decade because "Many leaders today are overwhelmed by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity."[1] The context within which we serve is increasingly unpredictable, and the technologies and issues of this age only compound the number of variables. Because we are so often in uncharted territory, we cannot simply rely on what we already know or what we have already arranged. In order to survive we must cultivate the flexibility and alacrity that enables us to stand within ambiguous situations and find a way forward. We need to help the people around us foster an orientation to life and ministry that allows for greater degrees of uncertainty, not less. That means investing our best energy in equipping people with the readiness to serve the world as it is, rather than fighting against unstoppable currents in an exhausting attempt to eliminate all inconvenience.

In this chapter we will explore the practice of improvisation as planned flexibility. If adaptive leadership is not about finding bulletproof and permanent solutions, then we need to understand the kind of readiness we are indeed able to facilitate. Be forewarned: It will not often be possible to relieve the full range of anxieties we encounter in ourselves and in those we lead. However, it is possible to help people prepare to minister in more flexible ways, even in the midst of uncertainty. What are the doubts and fears that feed resistance to the unexpected? What can we understand about improvisation as a discipline that will enable us to apply its lessons more concretely to the practice of ministry?

Improvisation as Planned Flexibility

At first glance, improvisation might seem to belong to the realms of comedians and jazz ensembles, extremely talented and outgoing

people riding unpredictable waves of artistic inspiration to the sheer delight of an audience. In marked contrast we might bristle at the word "improvise" because we have seen the poor results of many a haphazard, "I'm going to wing it." Neither sense of improvisation is helpful to leaders in ministry if we remain stuck between the extremes of delegating its practice to experts or misappropriating it to justify working without preparation. Somewhere in the middle is a readiness to be open that can be learned and cultivated to the great benefit of everyday ministry. My study and experience of improvisation has led me to believe that there are at least three interdependent elements in improvisation that have a direct bearing on Christian leadership: preparation, adaptation, and trusting relationships. I begin with an example.

I was first introduced to improvisation through Foundations of Christian Leadership, a program sponsored by Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School.[2] One morning we visited a studio on campus and observed a session with three musicians—a pianist, a percussionist, and a clarinetist.[3] We listened as their chords flowed into and out of familiar melodies with all the soul you might expect from a jazz ensemble. From time to time the lead would shift from one soloist to another. None of the three was trained primarily for jazz, but they practiced this form of music because they appreciated the way it asked them to journey together into new and uncharted territory. They demonstrated a playfulness at the borders of our expectations, surprising even each other from time to time. Clearly, there was a profound respect and trust at the center of their work, reinforced by the fact that each individual had committed himself to learning his own instrument well, in addition to pursuing a shared understanding of musical theory, aesthetic, and themes. They interacted in an organic way, listening carefully to one another, sometimes anticipating, sometimes following, and always appreciating one another. When they paused to reflect back upon what they had just demonstrated, the musicians told stories about cultivating their own readiness to play with others, learning to practice through their inhibitions, and finding a central melody or rhythm to which they could return in every song. We need not be world-class musicians to benefit from the underlying principles that make jazz so sweet to our ears—preparation, adaptation, and trust.

Preparation

Preparation is an effective way to create intentional margins and to set the stage for improvisation. At the core of any project is the very basic effort to maintain focus on a particular goal by making strategic choices, and part of that process is attempting to reduce the range of potential distractions. To those ends we work in advance to anticipate good questions, make and confirm arrangements, and help people align themselves with the underlying intentions of the project. Such efforts may be considered due diligence and common sense for professionals in ministry, yet there are limits to advanced preparation. Were all things in life predictable, preparation might prove a panacea. In other words, "Surely a better plan would have avoided this melodrama!" The secret to good preparation, however, is to recognize that plans always serve a fundamentally organic process. Jazz musicians regularly practice scales and written music in preparation for good improvisation with others. Life is guaranteed to unfold unpredictably, keeping proactive steps in permanent tension with seemingly more immediate demands. Leaders in ministry are called to help systems practice the fundamentals and increase the readiness for adaptation, maximizing whatever buffer is possible between what will work smoothly and what, invariably, will not.

Adaptation

Things will not always go smoothly and, in the moments they do go awry, we are presented with a choice. Will we run, fix, or adapt? Straightforward issues like lost keys or stained towels can be addressed quickly and decisively. More complicated issues, like interpersonal conflicts or questions about the long-term future, are not so easily outrun or remedied. We might actually need to make an adjustment to the plan, which could require letting go of a few expectations or engaging in some experimentation. Many musicians have stories about having introduced a dissonant tone or rhythm into a melody, only to have it redeemed by a fellow player. Adaptation is a gift, potentially, that we can give one another. Effective adaptation might require slowing down and spending some additional time in conversation until we have discovered what is really

behind the symptomatic hiccups we are encountering, but that is part of the process. In such conversations, we might find ourselves somewhat off balance, lacking confidence in the old ways and now searching for a new response that remains both faithful and hopeful. Clarity of mission can provide some measure of quality-control for adaptations—"Is this who we are?"—while a dash of hope helps us remain open to whatever is still unfolding—"Are we trusting the process?"

Trusting Relationships

Preparation and adaptation will never be rich, dynamic, and lively without trusting relationships to undergird them. Performers often talk about the creative space that exists between those on stage and the audience, and that was evident for the jazz players on the Duke campus as they responded musically to our singing, laughter, and clapping. The script and content of a performance is never really the point. Anything played out in an empty room lacks the energy of interaction. Similarly, performers rely upon their peers to draw out the best in them. When people engage the familiar and unknown elements of process together, they are choosing to extend the open hands of trust. Any good project or ministry is designed to build on this trust and deepen relationships inside and outside of the organization. Those relationships will be hindered or strengthened in real time, as we experience together both the necessities of preparation and the inevitability of adaptation. The resulting outcomes will be judged both by the quality of trust that emerges and our faithfulness to the original purposes.

Not long ago, I led a group of pilgrims on an encounter with the landscapes and religious tradition of Wales. We visited monasteries living and extinct, met with world-renowned artists and scholars, and soaked in the lush beauty of ragged cliffs and soft hills. The pilgrimage was spiritually stirring, to be sure, but it was also one of the most sustained experiences of planned flexibility that I have experienced as a leader in ministry. It taught me anew about the interdependence of preparation, adaptation and trusting relationships. The program of the pilgrimage required no less than

twelve months of *preparation*. With the help of colleagues and travel agents we researched possibilities, refined priorities, and made as many arrangements as were possible in advance. But to embark on the pilgrimage itself was to enter a time filled with the utmost ambiguity. One of the most important strategic decisions we made was to choose our focal points in advance. In our case, we wanted to stay particularly attuned to the ways that the Welsh landscape and the Cistercian monastic tradition spoke into our spiritual lives today. That preparation proved invaluable. Not only had we defined a general arc to the experience that offered opportunities for inspiration and renewal, but we had empowered ourselves to say "no" to the many things that would have filled our days to overflow. Our deliberate focus created better margins for *adaptation*. Nearly every day in-country we discovered loose details, shifts in the planned schedule or emerging possibilities that called for our consideration. Over and over we chose between equally good opportunities based upon what seemed to best enhance the pilgrimage. The days connected together like one beautiful and flowing act of improvisation. The pilgrims were drawn deeper into *trusting relationships*, becoming more and more connected by every decision. I found my confidence in colleagues who offered counsel and support, just as others gained a sense of ownership each time they contributed to or engaged in an adaptation to the plan. I could not have predicted the powerful stories that these pilgrims began to tell, but I can see in hindsight that they were the rich fruits of an experience created through solid planning, hope-filled adaptation, and no little mutual trust.

Improvisation as Practice

Every leader contributes to a team's fundamental readiness through her or his own preparation. It takes study, reflection, and much practice to learn the skills of an excellent minister. Whether our gifts are in administration, writing, pastoral care, or some other specialty, we are called to cultivate and share those particular gifts. Schools of theology create opportunities for lifelong learning because ministers are called to keep learning their whole lives long, whether or not they continue to gain credentials. Bishops and support

staff encourage ministers to commit to personal retreats and spiritual direction because it is clear that effectiveness in ministry is deeply connected to ongoing spiritual formation. We simply must be attending to our own journeys if we hope to be of service to others, especially for an extended time.

Part of attending to our own journeys is becoming increasingly conscious of our own fears and inhibitions. Adaptation and flexibility, by their nature, require letting some things go while also boldly taking up some other things that we may not completely understand. As much as I hate to admit it, the thought of an improvisation class does intimidate me. While the theory of becoming more flexible has clear value to me, the actual possibility that I might have to practice that theory is unnerving. My heart races as I picture myself trying to act spontaneously or become humorous on demand. I am afraid that people might be watching when I stumble into the very kinds of failure I work so hard to avoid most days. Truth be told, I am far more comfortable with putting my shoulder to the wheel in order to be well-prepared than submitting to the flow of everyday improvisation.

In the waves of everyday life, however, we do not often have the option to go over, under, or around the obstacles. We must go through them. Coming to grips with our own discomforts helps us better appreciate why others might be slow to change. If we see the possibility to lessen our anxieties in real life by practicing something in safe contexts, why wouldn't we do so? In retreat ministry lost keys and erroneous kitchen reports provide the spontaneous sessions for learning improvisation. They are relatively safe situations within which we can stretch and steel our trusting relationships one small instance at a time. By paying attention to the kinks in our armor that are made visible through our responses to small inconveniences, we may tap into larger truths that allow us to be more forthcoming about significant questions. A person who was once late in coming for spiritual direction taught me that.

About five minutes before the appointment was scheduled to begin, the directee called me from the road to say that he would be a few minutes late. When he finally arrived, a wave of tension entered the room with him without his saying a word. I could see

that he was not yet free from his race to the session. He let out a quick exhale as he dropped into his chair. He began with a topic he had prepared the day before, and I asked him to pause, "What are you experiencing right now?" He replied, "Actually, I am still distracted by being late. For the last hour and a half, ever since I knew I wouldn't make it on time, my head has ached and my chest has felt tight. It's like a caffeine buzz. I'm short on breath and I'm sure my blood pressure's as high as a runner's. I hate being late." Now tuned in to the spontaneity of the moment, we set down the pre-planned themes to unpack the raw material of his immediate experience. We pulled the thread of his discomfort to learn more about how his self-image was tied to being timely and what had caused him to avoid the risk of disappointing someone else in order to be on time for this appointment. In short, we practiced paying attention to what God might actually be up to, not in some planned scenario, but in the give-and-take of real life.

Through conversation and reflection we practice our way through the fears and emotions that otherwise inhibit our flexibility. What becomes available to us is the possibility of mutual learning and greater freedom to be more fully present in this moment, less driven by the compulsion to have everything perfectly planned and neatly sealed, and more inspired by hopefulness and grace-filled adventure. We may not be born with the disposition to thrive in the midst of a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, chaos, and ambiguity, but modern ministry demands that we learn to live and lead within it.

Innovation Applied

Especially because we have used professional jazz musicians to illustrate the virtues and disciplines of improvisation, we owe it to ourselves to look more closely at how planning for flexibility really works in the trenches of ministry. No matter what our particular setting might be, we no doubt respond to an endless stream of inquiries every day, making decisions as faithfully and swiftly as possible. While Christian leaders can never eliminate the inconvenience factor in ministry, there are some steps we can take to promote the

kind of culture in our organization that is both focused and flexible. It is possible to cultivate an environment that promotes growth and self-direction that advances the mission we share even when things do not go as expected.

First, *improve the margins alongside the work*. Create opportunities for process and reflection that demonstrate better attention and spaciousness. These interactions cannot happen without sufficient time, so leaders need to make tough choices about priorities. What can we let go to make room for conversation? Even the act of carving out these spaces and cultivating these conversations models a commitment to practice hospitality under pressure. What's more, such margins are important because they give people permission to experiment with mistakes. Margins give us room to reconnect with each other in planned or spontaneous ways and to assess or debrief what we have learned. When failure becomes part of the learning process, the team grows in its capacity to innovate more effectively.

Second, *play to the team's strengths*. Earlier chapters have encouraged leaders to choose stories intentionally, to learn our traditions well and to share power with others. These are important aspects of maintaining focus and alignment that leverage the unique giftedness of each team member for the sake of the mission. Through cycles of action, reflection, and reentry, the strengths and weaknesses of the team come more clearly into view. As each person develops a better sense of their own unique contribution to the work, we discover more about the gifts we possess and the help we still need. We might create content for this kind formation, but playing to existing or emerging strengths is better fostered by paying closer attention to the everyday situations that we already encounter.

Third, *play at the borders and return to the central themes*. Like musicians exploring variations on one main melody, leaders in ministry are shepherds of the language, stories, and symbols of our institutions. We help our communities adapt their way into the future by drawing on the inspirations of those who have gone before us. It is important for us to find the themes that resonate most deeply and that call us all into a prophetic future. These provide the touch points for every effort to reach out to new audiences or express our message in fresh ways. Here we find the true value of

developing mission statements together and returning to them as the melody that guides our decision making.

A ministry that cultivates both solid planning and flexibility becomes nimble and responsive to any needs it encounters. Scale and purpose are strategic allies. Practically speaking, any organization has financial need in relation to its size of operation. The ministry suffers when its best energies are sapped making ends meet, just as too little ministry makes it difficult to inspire donor support. Leaders need to continue pursuing the balance between action and resources, and wise preparation can enable an essential flexibility. We are not about the business of building impenetrable systems but are called to cultivate relationships.

Effective ministers do not embrace flexibility simply for change's sake. We embrace flexibility because we trust that God tends to become more visible at the edges of what we know. DeWitt Jones, a celebrated photographer for the National Geographic Society, encourages us to reinterpret the "change curve" as the "possibility curve."[4] In the places that demand our greatest flexibility, we encounter the humbling limits of our planning. That does not give us permission to abandon all purposefulness, but it does usher us into a readiness for experiences that may transform us. We close this chapter with a story shared with the permission of the Reverend Daniel J. Streeper, whose mother once demonstrated holy improvisation. Like the redemptive act of a savior who transformed suffering into life, this mother acted spontaneously and purposefully to create a new and important narrative:

> When I was in third grade, each member of my Cub Scout pack had to build a toothpick bridge as part of a diorama. All of the dioramas would be judged and the best ones would get ribbons. I loved art projects, so I built a wonderful wooden truss bridge with ramps and railings and supports—all made from toothpicks. I added roads and covered them with glue, sand and dirt to make them look more real. I even made grass. I thought it was the best thing ever and looked forward to the scout competition. On the night they were to be judged, I was so proud that I could not be dissuaded from carrying my diorama to the meeting. Mom, Dad, and I set out on our

way. We crossed the street and began walking across the school playground. About half way across, I slipped on a patch of snow covered ice and fell face forward—right on top of my beautiful bridge diorama—completely flattening it. I was as crushed as my bridge. I remember crying as my parents picked me up and checked to see if I was all right. Mom said, "Let's go home, we can fix this up." They took me home and my mother went to the medicine cabinet and pulled out a roll of first aid cotton for bandages. She went to her acrylic paints and grabbed a tube of black. Then she began to fashion a tornado out of the cotton and painted dirt and darkness onto it. She placed the tornado amidst the ruins of my diorama and soon it looked like an incredible disaster scene. It was absolutely awesome and won the first-place prize.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. How have you seen the discipline of planning help you focus your best energies on making an impact in the world?

2. What adaptations are you being invited to consider in order to serve a world that continues to change?

Notes

[1] Bob Johansen, *Leaders Make the Future: Ten New Leadership Skills for an Uncertain World*, rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2012), 1.

[2] The Foundations of Christian Leadership program through Leadership Education at Duke University is an excellent opportunity for Christian leaders to explore conceptual and theological frameworks for the unique demands of modern ministry. See http://leadership.divinity.duke.edu/what-we-offer/programs/foundation-of-christian-leadership.

[3] Anthony M. Kelly, Nicholas Lewis and Russell Lacy, "Improvisation of the BLAK Ensemble" (lecture, Duke University, Durham, NC, June 14, 2011).

[4] Dewitt Jones, *Celebrate What's Right with the World* (St. Paul, MN: Star Thrower Distribution Corporation, 2001), DVD.

Soaring in the Midst of Ambiguity

The eagle spreads its wings to glide high upon the power of potentially turbulent winds. Similarly, the Christian leader dares to explore shared potential, especially in the midst of change and uncertainty. This requires courage, honesty, and hope.

8

Courage

Innovate to Inspire

The regular exercise of flexibility, within the context of solid planning, teaches us about our vulnerability to the unexpected. That vulnerability comes with some risk but also great possibility. Writers know this, as Minnesota poet laureate Michael Dennis Browne once reminded me in a personal conversation. Browne talked about Richard Hugo's idea of an "initiating subject,"[1] which can be understood as the first experience—the spark of an idea—that sets a poet about the task of writing. The poet is compelled to pursue the meaning of that experience through language and yet the journey of writing is not solely about capturing that first experience. Seldom does a poem end up where the writer anticipated. The initial subject unfolds through an organic and fluid process that cannot be contained within the first wave of hopes and expectations. All this makes the journey of writing toward the "generated subject" as powerful, if not more so, than the initiating subject that served as the indispensable entré to what might become.

This chapter explores innovation as a matter of vibrancy for the minister and the community alike. Without submitting to encounters with initiating subjects and without seeking together the courage to embrace whatever might follow, we will miss the inspired moments necessary to move into a future brimming with life and possibility. It is all too easy to imagine settings in which the only shared goal is to preserve the status quo or to eliminate inconvenience. Where innovation is lacking, people of vision and passion

come to feel like empty shells because the pulse of ministry no longer beats at the ever-changing intersection of our callings and the world.

In many respects, innovation serves as a proper integration of the previous chapters. Being courageous enough to enter a creative space and to lead others with openness and conviction means that we have recovered some degree of groundedness in the moment, discovered some ways to perch in conversation, and are now embracing the possibility that we might soar even in the midst of ambiguity. The time for innovation, frankly, may not be quite right when we ourselves are busy trying to stop the bleeding or when we are still searching for an elementary sense of common ground. The kindling is prepared when the attributes of strong Christian leadership are well in place. Vision, awareness, poise, intentionality, conviction, mutuality, and readiness all work together dynamically to make a good mission become reality. And that is the fire of innovation.

The Notion of Innovation

It may be helpful to distinguish innovation from flexibility in order to understand its proper place in the formation of community and the advancement of a mission. Flexibility is the informed response to everyday stimuli. It is the ebb and flow of ministry on the most immediate scale. It requires foresight, formation, and ongoing evaluation, and yet it is primarily focused on responding to the ordinary with integrity. Innovation, although closely related, requires us to set our gaze on a more distant horizon. Of the two, innovation is more akin to the process of writing a poem, moving from an initiating subject toward a transformative discovery. Innovation, then, becomes important to the ongoing formation of community because it serves as the laboratory for vision in which the mission is tested and refined and made contagious.

One of the trends I see that most fuels my hope for the church is Christian leaders and communities engaging in ministry experiments of some kind or another. More often than not, these courageous men and women are innovating at the edge of their institutional boundaries because they believe something important

needs to happen there. Nine times out of ten, these experiments are less than lucrative, and the energy invested in them is sourced from outside the bounds of formal expectations and responsibilities. This is part of what makes them inspiring. I am recalling a number of examples I have encountered recently: a man using his spare time to write about what he has learned; a woman coaching other leaders part-time; a couple making their home available as a place of retreat; a congregation empowering the underemployed; people baking, making music, acting, networking, and companioning the poor. These innovators are engaging their world like the artists among us always have. They are faithfully and humbly attending to their obligations while also experimenting at the margins with ways to exercise their true passions. If we are to learn something about innovation from their courage, it should include a keen focus on the quality of our lives. Acting on their giftedness and sense of possibility, using their homes and communities as laboratories for change, they are making our world a better place.

It is not precisely the success of these innovators that brings us hope. If it were, we would have little tolerance for the nature of their work. Sometimes entrepreneurs lose money, start-ups fail or a solution turns out to be less effective than anticipated. We respect that innovation requires risk and persistence in the organic process of building relationships and honing a response to a perceived need. Innovation, then, is best approached as an experiment that continues to refine a mission while making a difference. The best innovations flow out of a sense of authentic values or commitments that are shared for the benefit to others. Innovators recognize the needs around them and attempt to marshal gifts and resources in response. When it works, the impact speaks for itself and the original mission is strengthened and affirmed. When it does not work, however, there may still be something to learn. The importance of disappointing results correlates to the degree to which they help sharpen the mission. The beauty of innovation is that it invites us to keep refining not only our approach to ministry, but also our clarity about the original impulses that gave it life.

Two things attract individuals and communities to innovation. One is the way that innovators model the process of refining a mission

just described. They demonstrate a willingness to ask questions and test presumptions that keeps fresh air circulating in the room. They seek out unexpected collaborators in their work and they try new approaches without being sure of success. While this can all be unnerving at times for some, most know intuitively that innovators show communities what is essential by bringing new life to a mission. Their openness and creativity stem from the underlying quality that attracts us most: their capacity to tap into something worthy and invest their lives in it. They seem to believe in what they are doing and exhibit a passion for their calling. We see how that dynamic draws other people, gifts, and resources to their cause. Innovation becomes a contagious act because we are all drawn toward the possibility of living out our calling and making a real impact on the world. Examples of innovation, as experiments in conviction and courage, assure us that it can be done. When individuals awaken to that possibility, especially when those individuals are gathered together in community, the world is already changed.

My father-in-law, Dennis Neels, was featured in a 2013 Grand Forks Herald article called "Back to Life."[2] A picture shows him in a ball cap and denim shirt, trimming a wide bur oak log using a chain saw with a thirty-two-inch bar. Behind him is the 130-year-old log cabin he and volunteers were in the process of restoring. That cabin had served over the years as a home to pioneers, a temporary church, and even a community center before falling into disrepair and use as a granary. Dennis's interest in restoring the cabin earned him a seat on the Niagara Community Historical Society, which had been hoping to restore the cabin for twenty years. With his help, the local community came together with money and muscle, and the cabin was re-dedicated within a year. Dennis is not just a member of the historical society, however. He is also the pastor of the thriving rural parish there. That congregation is welcoming new members, including grandchildren in Christmas pageants, drawing youth for summer programs, and celebrating their newly repaired roof after raising about fifty thousand dollars. By any standard that is a community awakened to possibility.

The Call for Inspiration

As we explored in the first chapter, it is likely that the real epidemic of burnout among ministers is due less to exhaustion from overwork than to a fundamental loss of vision. A disconnect tends to grow within a minister over time without a clear sense of calling and a congruent application of one's God-given gifts. If that is indeed true, then the wellbeing of a minister depends only in part upon a healthy diet, regular exercise, sleep, and effective time management skills. While those dimensions will always remain important, still some hunger will persist at the even deeper levels of identity and meaning, as we long for the assurance that our questions about who we are and what we do indeed connect with the purposes of God in the world. Ministers are not alone. The same reality applies to any Christian seeking to live faithfully as a disciple of Christ. Everyone longs for a sense of calling and purpose that inspires life and incorporates everyday experiences into a larger grace-infused story.

There is a related lesson to be learned from the apple tree in our back yard. I have been watching our young tree closely this summer as its branches already bow under the weight of tart, crisp apples only halfway grown. It is an amazing intersection of biology and physics as the tree simultaneously pours energy into branches that grow outward and upward, even while investing more and more water and nutrients into the growing fruit. As the apples get bigger, gravity pulls down the weakest ends of the branches until they sag. The tree actually risks breaking its branches under the weight of its own fruit. Defending it from itself, I have steadily thinned the apples and arranged supports. Evidence of this seasonal tension is visible in the older parts of the tree where the branches have hardened into bent but generally upward moving shapes. This apple tree grows because it cannot resist the inspiration to bear fruit, even at potential cost to itself. It reaches upward and outward, while at the same time it explodes with fruit along the way. In fact, it is so successful that it needs outside help.

My sense is that excellent ministry is really the fine art of cultivating holy inspiration. Communities that are bursting at the seams with innovation may need Christian leaders who are able

to help their members thin out the excess and prune that which is not ultimately life-giving. This requires holding open important questions about what most truly advances the mission given existing resources, as well as what might be weighing down the community's branches to their breaking point. It takes confidence and no little trust to act today with the long-term good in mind, even when we risk disappointing others in the short-term. Some pruning and support structures may be necessary. Unlike the natural difficulties of excess fruit bearing, communities that are short on innovation need Christian leaders who are able to feed the roots, tend the less productive branches, and encourage people to remember what they were created to do and to be. Sometimes leaders must find ways to demonstrate concretely what it means to bear fruit in keeping with the mission, hoping that sparks of innovation will eventually catch fire and motivate others to participate. Wherever communities lie on the spectrum of active innovation, all need Christian leaders with the capacity to promote the ongoing process of nurturing, harvesting, celebrating, and attending to long-term growth.

Inspiring others is neither a plug-and-play operation nor an end in itself. Even the most charismatic leader might draw large crowds and miss the real purpose behind it all. We are called to the formation of people in Christ-likeness and to the bearing of fruit that bears witness to the Gospel. There is nothing formulaic or even predictable about innovation except for this: the process is relational. We engage innovation at the edges of our knowing and our calling because there God helps us understand more clearly who we are called to be and how we are called to serve. Every practice of ministry we have explored to this point helps create the setting within which that discovery is made. Perhaps the greatest inspiration we find through innovation is the sense that we are part of something much larger than ourselves. Participating in a shared mission, one that can only be explored and expanded together, cultivates a life-giving sense of belonging and vision.

Tending Adaptive Challenges through Innovation

The tricky thing about vision and inspiration is that they need constant care and cultivation. It is not as if any organization can

reach the pinnacle of clarity and then escape the recurring need to revise mission statements or strategic plans. Organizations become healthy and strong when they submit to the ongoing process of learning through experience and refining the mission together along the way. In essence, innovations provide people with "initiating subjects" that open the path to renewed and mutual discovery. What distinguishes a good discovery process from a mediocre one is the pursuit of the most significant growth points. Squeaky wheels often call for attention, but they are seldom the sole focus of what is truly important. For innovations to serve the larger purposes of formation, we need to distill and pay attention to the driving factors that come to light.[3] Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, educators in the Harvard Kennedy School, make a useful distinction between what they call "technical problems" and "adaptive challenges." They write:

> Every day, people have problems for which they do, in fact, have the necessary know-how and procedures. We call these technical problems. But there is a whole host of problems that are not amenable to authoritative expertise or standard operating procedures. They cannot be solved by someone who provides answers from on high. We call these adaptive challenges because they require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community. Without learning new ways—changing attitudes, values, and behaviors—people cannot make the adaptive leap necessary to thrive in the new environment.[4]

Innovations sometimes serve to smooth out operational glitches using information and skills we already have at our disposal, but they can also have another effect. Innovations can help people address adaptive challenges by inviting communities to approach the edges of their own growth. I recently watched an intriguing documentary with my family called *Living On One Dollar*.[5] Four college-aged men who were studying economics and film had spent the summer living in the highlands of Guatemala among the poorest of the poor. What was unique about their project was that they had designed parameters for themselves that enabled them to experience a lifestyle nearly as precarious as the experience of the local villagers. They lived on the edge of starvation and uncertainty,

finding friendships and a vision for change. The most compelling part of the story is that they built upon their experience by returning home and helping others understand and respond to the very real difficulties of poverty in our world. They have created a nonprofit, made presentations worldwide, and developed projects that enable viewers like my children and me to become agents of change.

Similarly, ministry leaders are called to shape experiences that help motivate change and inspire action. That may very well take us to the edge of our expertise. When we attempt to address the underlying challenges within our communities and find ourselves at the limits of our existing knowledge and skill-sets, we know we are in the realm of adaptive challenges. *Living On One Dollar* reminded our family that we may not know all that we think we do about those we are trying to serve. Our conversations about the children and families featured in the film increased our awareness and equipped us for a better response. The adaptive challenges are found where assumptions and preferences become unmasked in service of a greater possibility. Innovation provides the context for people to experiment, discover, and learn together. What adaptive challenges do best, as Heifitz and Linsky observe, is invite a change in attitude, values, and behaviors. None of this is comfortable, but it is certainly the stuff of inspiration.

One nuance that is especially helpful in ministry is that adaptive challenges need not be addressed from a position of fear, deficit, or scarcity. Even if the challenges elicit discomfort, we can appreciate them as invitations to greater authenticity. If we only use the new language about adaptive challenges as a clever way to name what ails us, we miss the real potential. The language summons us to become more conscious and transparent about the underpinnings of our community, better informing any discernment before us. The best innovations are drawn toward and flow out of a sense of abundance. A solid mission begs us to experiment with what is possible and even more will be possible if we grow as a community along the way. Ministry is not primarily about alleviating all technical problems. In the end, ministry is shepherding communities faithfully into the future, and innovations can serve as contained experiments that help us engage both technical and adaptive challenges together.

Innovation Applied

Over the last number of years, the staff of the Benedictine Center has developed a School of Lectio Divina, a School of Discernment, and Benedictine pilgrimages, and it has also experimented with other new forms of publication and outreach. Again and again, good questions or perceived needs have given birth to mutual learning and meaningful ministry. One project currently underway illustrates well what we have learned about the practice of innovation. Sr. Virginia Matter, OSB, a spiritual director on our team, has long dreamed of building one or two hermitages, similar to small cabins, for private retreat guests who would like to experience a deeper kind of solitude and aloneness with God. Over the last few years, an increased number of requests for just such an experience has opened the door for us to propose and embark upon a study of the possibility. The notion of a study phase is particularly important in a Benedictine community because it allows for inquiry while acknowledging that any final decision will rest with the Sisters themselves. A committee was formed to design and steer a process to explore the concept and cultivate the Sisters' support.

Five principles have emerged through our process that may be helpful in other contexts. First, *maintain focus on the needs*. What we observe about the needs around us emerge through the exercise of ministry. Unless the response to these needs is congruent with the mission, it is not helpful to proceed further with the innovation. Second, *clarify roles and responsibility*. Those who are shepherding the innovation need to claim the full potential of their leadership while also respecting the limits of their authority. This provides important grounding, especially when tensions arise. Third, *move at the pace of the community*. Find the rhythm between behind-the-scenes progress and public conversation that balances momentum with good communication. Fourth, *focus on the adaptive challenges* during the early stages. In some respects, a particular innovation's real value is in serving the larger purpose of engaging communities in process. If the adaptive challenges are well addressed, the technical solutions will fall into place down the line. Lastly, *stay connected*. The most significant challenges are nearly always about relationships; tending to those connections is essential to leading for change.

If nothing else, the hermitage study has fostered connections over the past few years by giving the Benedictine Center an opportunity to make regular reports to the monastic community. The pattern of those presentations is much the same. We review the progress to date, engage in shared dialogue, and indicate the next question to be explored. Some might fear that the project will never be completed at this rate, but it is unfolding exactly as it needs to in this particular context. The pace of progress has matched the formal structures of the monastic community. For its part, the committee has stayed focused on making the monastic value of solitude more accessible to those who are hungry for quiet. It has also remained clear about the purposes of the study and the responsibility that the committee members themselves hold for envisioning the process and seeing it through to completion. We have been proactive in facilitating shifts in attention away from technical problems and toward the more central adaptive challenges while we strive to maintain a sense of connectedness and transparency. All this is inspiring a healthy sense of experimentation within the community. The committee is modeling both good initiative and respect for monastic culture. Every conversation gives people one more opportunity to work through their doubts and fears, even as they are being formed toward a change in values, attitudes, and behaviors. Not everyone is eager for these conversations to continue, as would be true of any innovation in any community. Still, the leadership of the Benedictine Center and the leaders of the monastic community are convinced that the process surrounding this innovation is more important to the future than its content. The added bonus is that the process is holding open a window of possibility so that the idea of hermitages might someday become real.

Many unknowns remain related to the hermitage study, and the actual buildings will surely remain secondary to the primary benefits of this conversation for quite some time. Most likely, the study will be completed within a year and the committee will finish its regular reporting on the progress. Then will follow one more meeting. The members of the study committee will present a summary and recommendation as a single, purposeful picture of what might be. There will be references made to the breadth and thoroughness

of the study and expressions of appreciation for the series of conversations that has led to that moment of integration. The members will review the needs to which the vision responds and highlight the ways hermitages are connected to the mission. They will describe the endorsements for placement, design, fundraising, and business plans. Lastly, the committee will ask the Sisters whether they believe the community should pursue this innovation as a way of entering boldly and faithfully into the future. When the Sisters respond, their "yes" or "no" will be charged with all of the prayerful dialogue that has been part of the process from the beginning.

The committee would not be as committed if the members did not already prefer that the Sisters would offer a resounding "yes" to the eventual proposal, but it is also important for us to cultivate a healthy dose of indifference. There exists a real possibility that the Sisters will say "no," and that would be their prerogative. If the answer is "no," then each of us will need to unpack our own experience of grief and disappointment. Innovation, after all, involves more than a little potential that we will encounter some resistance. Cultivating a dose of indifference will not completely shield us, but it may help us reinforce our sense of groundedness in the process itself more than the outcome. We did not embark on this study to push the Sisters toward the committee's will, but to prepare for the future together. Whatever happens, if we can trust that the Spirit is accomplishing something we cannot fully comprehend, then we will be reconnecting with the reality that we, too, are being formed through the experience. The real purpose of any innovation is to embrace the creative tensions and work through the questions together. Faithful innovators can rest confidently in the honest work of shepherding communities toward a disposition of hope and possibility. We enable others to describe their readiness to say "yes" to a particular project. Should they choose to say "not at this time," we can take comfort in the likelihood that some committee down the road will pick up where we left off and be inspired by the spark of this innovation.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What has been your own experience with innovation? When have you created innovations or encountered them through the work of others?

2. How have you been challenged or inspired through innovation?

3. In what ways is God calling you to the edges of ministry? What gives you courage there?

Notes

[1] See Richard Hugo, "Writing Off Subject," in *The Triggering Town* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 11ff.

[2] Kevin Bonham, "Back to Life," *Grand Forks Herald*, September 9, 2013, A1–A2.

[3] I have written elsewhere on this theme, particularly within the context of Benedictine retreat centers. See Samuel Rahberg, "The Future of Benedictine Retreat Ministry: An Adaptive Challenge for St. Paul's Monastery," *Benedictines Magazine,* 65:2 (Fall/Winter 2012), 18–28.

[4] Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002), 13.

[5] *Living On One Dollar*, directed by Zach Ingrasci, Sean Leonard, and Chris Temple, produced by Indieflix (Toronto, ON: Living On One, 2013).

9

Honesty

Befriend Your Limits

In my experience, the majority of people who seek out spiritual direction are taking up one of life's two most significant tasks. Either they are discerning a calling of some kind or they are looking for help in getting unstuck. When someone hits the proverbial wall, the two tasks are interwoven. Disappointment, loss, grief, and confusion are commonplace. In that difficult mental, emotional, and spiritual place, the healthiest way forward is to embrace our vulnerability with rigorous honesty and to come home to signs of God's unwavering presence. In that way we befriend our experience of limitations for the sake of becoming more truly who we are.

Two composite examples of stories from Christian leaders may help us get a feel for what it means to have reached the end of our rope. The first is a woman we will call Susan whose position was recently eliminated after a long and successful career as a chaplain. Despite all assurances to the contrary, Susan cannot help but wonder if her spirit of innovation and willingness to speak the truth finally struck a nerve. She is only a few years from retirement and doubtful that it will be possible to find a position so close to the holidays. Her savings are sparse and she is feeling betrayed and wounded. The second person is Paul who, by external appearances, enjoys a rich and full ministry as a pastor. Unfortunately, the isolating pressures of concealing a broken marriage and strained relationships with his children have become unbearable alone. When Paul's personal challenges recently became public, it hit him like a wave of defeat. Not only is he at a loss in addressing his anger, but he is consumed by feelings of embarrassment and duplicity.

Both Christian leaders have hit their own unique kind of wall, but their expressions of what they were feeling were surprisingly similar. Both wept what my friend Doris LeCount calls a "towel cry," when it becomes impossible to speak and see because you are overcome by more tears than an ordinary tissue can hold. It was clear to see that Susan and Paul were each physically fatigued and spiritually depleted. They had not just experienced a minor stumble; they had found their own forms of rock bottom. Their foundations were shaken and they were feeling stuck in that place. They had come seeking help.

Their reactions toward God were understandable. Initially, there was disbelief that God would allow the ministries of faithful and hardworking people like them to be disrupted. They had served too long and too well to see it all crumble so quickly. There was confusion about what the painful experience was supposed to be teaching them and distrust that these were truly the best means for those lessons to be learned. This gave way to persistent anger with God until they could look even deeper. The most unsettling feeling that they expressed was the sense of being alone and abandoned. Being honest enough to reach toward that truth offered the first possibility of real relief.

What is interesting about stories like these is that hitting the wall or finding rock bottom is seldom an acute, short-lived experience. Most often the final straw simply sheds light on difficulties that have been mounting for far too long. Neither person could point to the exact beginning, but once they had reached their wall, they could look back and recognize the string of events that had led up to that moment. The unrest had been persistent until something finally gave way. There was nothing to do but give in. Even coming to spiritual direction signaled a slightly new place. Here, just the other side of the breaking point, they were starting to ask, "Where is this all coming from? What am I finally beginning to see?"

The odds are that every Christian leader will at one time or another encounter a sense of lost dreams and defeat. Such experiences will bring to light the internal exhaustion that we have held at bay for years. Although we can recognize that the majority of what we accomplish is beautiful and good, we will eventually have

to struggle with the haunting reality that our most sincere efforts are sometimes inadequate. Even when we gather up our best giftedness and shoulder our way into new possibilities, we cannot altogether avoid uncertainty. That realization can promptly escort us to the edge of sadness, isolation, and hopelessness. Exactly what brings a person to that edge or opens one's eyes to deep seated discouragement will vary as widely as the range of possible relationships and responsibilities. This we know: that we will eventually find ourselves hard against painful truths and we will need to befriend our grief, our frustrations and our tears.

Collisions with the Self

Befriending your limits begins with an encounter. Hitting the wall is not a moment that we set out to find, nor is it possible to flip a switch when we decide that now would be a good time to grow. It comes upon us unexpectedly, whether through a single hurt or through a string of them that finally pushes through the façade. The encounter ushers us into a new and more humble stance through the very weaknesses we work so diligently to avoid. This is in keeping with the great paradox of the Gospel—that Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). When we brush close to our limits, the experience of humility resembles what ancient Christians called "compunction." Tears, they assured, can be a sign of sweet suffering. It has also been said that tears are a sign that God is very near. While we may not be immediately ready to claim painful moments of sorrow as sweet or see the presence of God through our tears, we can lean on any inkling of trust and hope that something new is beginning to open within us. Transitions at midlife are well-known encounters that teach this lesson well. Those who write about the two halves of life suggest that those in their first half of life learn best through success, while those in their second learn far more through their limitations.[1] Limitations, they argue, introduce new possibilities. James Hollis, whose insights we visited earlier, calls such experiences "collisions" with the self that are essential to the process of becoming more mature:

> As we grow older, we find repeated affronts to our sense of self, our capacity to control outcomes, and our presumptions of omnipotence. As the child once fantasized that its wishes governed the world, and the youth fantasized that heroism could manage to do it all, so the person in the second half of life is obliged to come to a more sober wisdom based on a humbled sense of personal limitations and the inscrutability of the world. . . . Out of the experience of suffering, an invitation is found . . . it is a humbling that deepens spiritual possibility.[2]

The invitation in this collision begs for our attention because there is something inherently precious about coming to the edge of our capacities. Benedict was speaking to that sacred threshold when he advised his monks: "Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die" (RB 4.47). We must stay within arms' reach of our tears and our mortality or we risk making idols of our success, our perceived control, and our imagined influence upon the world. Our bodies and souls will protest such idolatry through the language of weight gain, sleepiness, grouchiness, cluttered minds, and even sadness or disconnection. Practiced ministers might have the strength to bowl over those sensations for a time, but not indefinitely. Creative people accustomed to resistance might counter those protests with justifications for pressing on, or convince themselves temporarily that the situation will be better after *this* person has gone or *that* project has been finished. Unfortunately, tomorrow will likely begin to resemble today when another person or project becomes the new focus of our discomfort. Left unattended, there remains a real possibility that once we run out of genuine stamina, we will come to rely upon other motivators like anger or pride or the preservation of appearances to keep pressing on. Such powerful and volatile emotions can turn inward upon us until we find ourselves gripped by anxiety and depression. Sometimes we need to encounter our limits in order to see clearly and move forward in more genuine ways.

Honest Acceptance

A number of years ago I found myself very practically confronted with the limitations of my physical capacities. That particular morn-

ing I sat on the ridge of our unfinished roof, having carried only two of the sixty-pound bundles of shingles up to the top. There, on the ridge, I panted in stunned disbelief. Friends and I had spent the previous two days up and down ladders, stripping the roof and wearing out leather gloves, but my friends were gone and the roof was still not done. My body ached, my spirit was worn, and in that moment I realized it would be impossible for me to finish the project on my own. As I sat looking out over the neighborhood wondering what I might do next, a neighbor came out to lend a hand.

Straightforward encounters with limits like these can be especially helpful. They lack the complexities and nuances of sophisticated systems, making it easier to see and harder to deny the steps we must take once we have hit a wall. The first step is *trusting your body's response to the situation*. That morning on the roof I had trouble clenching a hammer and standing up straight, so I knew without a doubt that the project was bigger than me. Each of us must come to appreciate the unique way our own body signals that we are approaching our limits. Intense stretches of busy days, even if punctuated by some sleep, eventually take their toll. Pay close attention because the body offers both the first warning signs and the final veto for all our activities. Over time, if we have ignored and suppressed warning signs along the way, our bodies' only defense is to communicate more loudly.

Once we have taken note of the body's warning, it is time to *engage the limits realistically*. The signals that something is not okay do not themselves remedy the situation. They only begin to offer important clues. Engaging reality is accepting the invitation to reconsider our strategy, and that is exactly what I was doing on the roof. I was pausing to absorb the reality that the project would not be finished on time nor in the way that I had expected. I was coming to grips with the fact that I had underestimated the task and somehow needed to yield. The same thing happens in ministry settings when we accumulate responsibility for more good ideas and pastoral needs than we can really manage. As difficult as it may be, we will find at some point the need to yield to our limits and reconsider our strategy.

Fortunately for me, the new strategy walked down the sidewalk and called up to me on the roof. As it turns out, this neighbor had

worked previously on a roofing crew and was glad to haul shingles for a few hours. Very simply, the next step is *turning toward help*. That help may assist us in addressing our underlying issues, rethinking our strategy, or directly shouldering the load. Any time we are up against a firm limitation, some form of help is necessary. Turn toward others. Allow them to help you see more clearly and adjust your strategy.

The last step in honestly accepting our brush with limits is *claiming the gift of new perspectives that the experience offered*. Besides taking comfort in the knowledge that the next roof on this house would likely be the responsibility of my children, I did take with me a new appreciation for the nature of community, the dignity of hard work, and the clear reminder that I am not invincible. Those truths accompanied me down off of that ridge and back into my daily work with others. Each encounter with our limits teaches us something more about how our bodies call out for attention, how we might better navigate demands and responsibilities, and how beautifully dependent we are on the other people in our lives. The choice is ours whether or not to carry those insights away.

Maturing Perspective

The process of befriending limits eventually leads us to a clearer sense of identity and connection, but the road to get there can be difficult. One of the challenges is the faulty assumption that limits are constraining forces at work to keep us smaller and more isolated than we want to be. In truth, limits actually offer a much greater freedom. I remember learning about a child psychology study that examined the behavior of school children in a playground.[3] Without a fence, the children huddled close to the center and avoided excursions to the perimeters. When a fence was added along the boundaries of the playground, however, children moved away from the center and played together throughout the farthest reaches of the boundaries. Their freedom and confidence for interaction was actually expanded by a clearer sense of the limits. The findings suggest that something similar may be true for adults.

One of the privileges I cherish as a spiritual director is having the opportunity to hear a person's most important discoveries. A number of Christian leaders with whom I journey are actively en-

gaged in the process of befriending their own limits and they have shared with me experiences and insights that have expanded their perspectives and strengthened their confidence. Having gained through these bits of wisdom a renewed sense of themselves as individuals and leaders within community, and knowing the value of mutual support, these Christian leaders were eager to share with readers a few examples of their most helpful insights.

Roger's therapist helped him contextualize the drivenness that Christian leaders are prone to exhibit through an image found in nature: "Some trees live about thirty years," the therapist said, "unless you abuse them or ignore them. Then maybe less. And if you throw your best at them and nurture them well, those trees will *still* live to about thirty years." All too often, Christian leaders set out after the kingdom of God with the zeal of Don Quixote jousting with windmills. Zeal is important and necessary, but our encounters with reality remind us that there are also natural limits and life-cycles to ideas, projects and organizations that are well beyond our control.

That does not excuse us, as Susan discovered, from employing our best selves in the meantime. We are called to nurture God's trees to their fullest thirty years. Father Eugene Hensell, OSB, a monk of St. Meinrad's Abbey, had caught Susan's attention as he retold the familiar parable of the Sower and the Seed during a retreat he was leading at St. Paul's Monastery: "God's call to us is this: 'Plant seeds. I do the watering; I do the growing. You plant the seeds.'"[4] Susan took to heart God's unmistakable instruction in the parable: "Keep planting seeds."

Kathy is another Christian leader who, with the help of a counselor, had wrestled with the spiritual significance of having encountered her limits while in the very act of planting seeds. Her counselor had helped her examine her experience of prayer with this question: "Do you know how to tell the difference between a religious experience and a psychotic one? The psychotic experience will leave you feeling powerful and the religious experience will leave you feeling humbled."[5] When being reintroduced to our limits leaves us feeling truly humbled (and even tearful, perhaps), we can be sure that the moment is sacred and that it is especially important to be paying attention to what God is doing within us.

Each of us will encounter gems of wisdom like these, which reinforce for us one immeasurably important theme: that we are called to exercise our essential identity and giftedness with the appropriate degree of zeal. True humility is spending neither too much nor too little energy being who we really are. As Norvene Vest writes, "We can refuse relationship with God by thinking too little of ourselves no less than by thinking too much. . . . We must face our potential for greatness no less than our creatureliness, in the full practice of humility. . . . Humility involves holding in tension *both* consciousness of our own imperfections *and* joyful living with confidence in God's mercy."[6] We will be judged not by outcomes that are outside of our control but by whether we have kept faithfully and humbly planting seeds "by the help of God's grace," as Benedict reminds us at the outset of the Rule (Prol. 41).

Experiment with Limits

In the end, befriending our limits sets us free to experiment with failure. Failure is not confined to the large and public shortcomings that we imagine will bring an end to our good reputation, nor missing the mark while attempting to exceed our own goals like athletes striving to improve their performance. Those are not the kinds of potential failure that make us most afraid. The most dangerous failure is that dark nagging fear that if we do not press harder and longer, then things will go undone and people will think less of us. The failure that really bothers us is the possibility that we will not rise up to fulfill the expectations of others. That fear distracts us from laying full claim to the lives that are ours alone to lead.

In the shadow of our fears about meeting the expectations of others, we must keep experimenting so that we might learn where the true beginnings and ends of our capacities lie. Robert Greenleaf, writing in his essay entitled *The Servant as Leader*, described the practice of "systematic neglect."[7] The art of systematic neglect enables leaders to work according to their true priorities. Greenleaf argued that leaders must cultivate the capacity to step back and discern which tasks to take up as essential and which ones to let go of as less important, rehearsing not only the art of choosing but also the conviction to endure its unpleasant consequences. To do so

is to risk fleeting failure in order to learn the language of the more quiet and enduring voice of truth.

Unfortunately, we do not listen well to that inner voice initially. This morning I reached up into the highest cupboard and, along with the coffee I wanted to retrieve, I brought down three fine wine glasses, not the durable everyday ones, but the most delicate glasses we use for special dinners and evenings with friends. None of them survived the drop to the counter nor the crash to the kitchen floor. What was more painful than the broken glass and the inconvenience was knowing that I had reached into that same cabinet for weeks and thought to myself many times, "It would be wise to rearrange these glasses before I break one." Without stepping back, I had repeatedly chosen to override my quiet inner voice in a rush to set about other tasks. What would have happened—or rather not have happened—had I listened even once? Imagine the difference it would make to our decision making and our creating if we practiced paying better attention to the gentle stirring of the Spirit and the sometimes quiet voice of conscience, which is deeply informed by our intuition, our gifts, and the lessons learned from past encounters with our limits.

Take as another example the writing of this chapter. I woke one morning with some clarity and followed my Muse. Over the course of a couple hours, I seemed to catch up with her and even outpace her, but that didn't stop me. I attempted to drag her along, realizing the whole way that I was drifting further from my original point with every appearance of black letters upon white space. We tend to drive our agendas for ministry in a similar way. The art of coming to know and appreciate one's limits is like discerning the presence and, perhaps more importantly, the absence of the Muse. It is not always clear that we are approaching the end of our rope. Since motivation and inspiration are nuanced sensations, it is possible to exhaust our focus long before our persistence. There is wisdom in occasionally turning down the loud volume of persistence and habit in order to pay attention to the more soft-spoken gift of single-mindedness. This might happen on the small scale as we set down a project temporarily to walk outside, to ponder, and to live life a bit between attempts to create something meaningful. We can rest knowing the work will call us back.

Wisdom slowly comes into view and shapes the way we order our lives and apply our gifts. That is the genius of the biblical notion of Sabbath, God's blessing upon the rhythm of the human week, and it is curious that Sabbath remains an anomaly for our time. For some reason we find it difficult to accept the regular discipline of slowing down these human bodies and spirits. Have we convinced ourselves that the Creator's gift of Sabbath is a better fit for less indispensable people? What would it be like to experiment occasionally with stepping back and purposefully neglecting some things, just to see if we can ease into deeper attention to the priorities that have been laid upon our hearts? We might fail, at least according to the world's standards of productivity and the approval of those around us, but experimenting with our limits may help us practice becoming no less and no more than we really are.

Jesus Prays for His Disciples

When we are called to confront our limitations we might well wonder what God has in store. If we desire any assuring word of comfort and encouragement, it is this: we are not alone and the Spirit is at work. Christian leaders refuse to believe that God abandons us. In fact, we trust what the biblical narrative affirms again and again—that God is all the more present when people have been brought to their knees. In my own life, it was Jesus' prayer for the disciples in John 17 that finally started to move the idea of befriending the limits from my head to my heart. Although I had been praying through the Gospel for a number of years, it took a sharp encounter with my own limits to become aware of the irritation and pride that had colored the lens of my reading. I had studied every dialogue and every sign, harvesting insight as if I were Christ's equal in the narrative. In my eagerness to learn from him as prophet and wonder-worker and to apply those lessons to my own practice of ministry, I had resonated too much with his frustration and disbelief over others who were not listening. I had stood beside Jesus watching as others came to him looking for help. One day I realized that my true place was not beside him, but before him among the crowds . . . and I cried. I heard myself say out loud, "I

am neither Jesus nor his equal." When I turned back to the Gospel anew, determined to take my proper place as a disciple at his feet, I found Jesus there waiting, already praying for me. Although our first inclination might be to flee from the experience of our limits, it is at these very edges of our capacities that we at last discover who we are and who we are not, and on that honest and holy threshold we encounter the Christ who works through weakness to set us free.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What limits have you encountered and what did you experience there at that edge of your capacities?
2. What signals have you learned to be your body's way of telling you that you are reaching your limit?
3. Think of a time when you navigated your limits well. Who were the companions and what were the behaviors that helped you do so?
4. What has the confrontation with your own limits taught you about true freedom?

Notes

[1] See Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2011). See also James Hollis, *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife* (Toronto, ON: Inner City, 1993).

[2] Hollis, *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life* (New York: Gotham, 2005), 85.

[3] While I have not yet been able to locate a citation for the original study, I believe the insight remains worthy of inclusion and beg the reader's indulgence.

[4] Eugene Hensell, OSB, "Benedict in Changing Times: Monastic Wisdom for a Troubled Age" (lecture, Benedictine Center of St. Paul's Monastery, St. Paul, MN, October 26, 2013).

[5] This question resembles an idea found in Lionel Corbett, *The Religious Function of the Psyche* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 102ff.

[6] Norvene Vest, *Desiring Life: Benedict on Wisdom and the Good Life* (Boston, MA: Cowley, 2000), 60.

[7] Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Indianapolis, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 1970).

10

Hope

Hold It Gently

Limitations have the power to show us how tightly we have been grasping for some sense of control. The exhaustion that comes from resisting those limitations will eventually trump our anger and disappointment, leaving us on the threshold of an entirely different disposition. A quiet voice calls us to hope. Having been escorted to the edge of our willpower and disarmed of the effectiveness of wits and charm, we can, in the beginning, become disoriented. At this point ministers begin to wonder whether or not it is time to throw in the towel. If the question is taken up solely in that rawest of forms, we may miss the deeper significance of the moment. It is possible that God waits at the edge of our limitations, inviting us to embrace a hopeful posture for ministry that is only beginning to emerge, one that is more gentle, Christ-centered, and sustainable.

My deepest concern in these chapters is the well-being of ministers and the people they serve. That concern comes from frequent encounters with women and men who can no longer avoid the potent question of calling: "Is God telling me that it is time to go?" Once such a question has been aired, we must seek a response for the good of our souls and our ministries, and yet the answer may not be as simple as "yes" or "no." A man named James came to see me for spiritual direction with this very question. He was a veteran minister in the field of faith formation, a man whose experience with parishes large and small had helped him recognize that the relational and collaborative dimensions of ministry were the most life-giving aspects of his work. Recent transitions brought personality clashes to his parish and, combined with an apparent lack of

vision at the highest levels of leadership, left him with the nagging sense that his best days of ministry were in the past. "Maybe God is telling me it's time to go," he said. James was not just thinking about leaving the parish; he was considering leaving ministry entirely.

Intentional Waiting

Befriending the limits, unlike attempting to overpower them, is about cultivating a more gentle tone and a potentially new way forward. Once we have exhausted our willpower, it becomes clear that gentleness is the only feasible and sustainable tact for a life in ministry that is sure to remain complicated. Difficulties and frustrations will persist, resurfacing in continuously changing forms, just as certainly as some personalities will always annoy us more quickly than others. The daily rigors of discernment will not be relieved often enough by mountain top experiences or bursts of clarity about who we are called to be. Even so, each day is a fresh invitation to live into our baptismal calling, an invitation that we hold cupped in our hands as we walk tenderly through real life. Esther de Waal named this possibility brilliantly with the title of her book *Living with Contradiction*.[8] Noticing the contradictions, she might say, is not quite enough. We must live into them, watching for the presence of God as we learn to hold contradictions together. Therein lies the third way, not just in one contradiction or the other, but finding perspective in the tension itself. Only in submitting to that process do we begin to find freedom and hope in the midst of tension. Brushes with our limitations, uncomfortable as they may be, help us loosen our grip and practice opening our hands to receive a calling that is being shaped one day at a time.

When the day brings trouble to our soul, choosing to leave or stay might seem the most expedient thing to do. At times the need to escape a situation is unavoidable because the hurt or exhaustion has become too intense. We choose to leave. At other times, we may be so pinned down by fear or the refusal to examine and accept reality that we cannot bring ourselves to imagine change of any kind. We choose to stay. Either of these two options represents a quick and concrete answer, if nothing else, but both can leave us destined to reincarnate the same questions over and over throughout a lifetime

of ministry. We move from one position to the next, locked into a pattern of burnout and departure or disillusionment and disconnect unless we can find the third way. When James brought forward the question "Is God calling me to go?" I asked him to consider prayerfully that God's invitation might actually be coming not in two possibilities but in three: to go, to stay, or to wait. Almost immediately, the tension fell from his face and shoulders and he said, "God is calling me to wait." What if God is actually beckoning us into a time of waiting? What purpose would that serve and what are we supposed to be doing in the ambiguous place between going and not going?

Practiced Attentiveness

It is always presumptuous to tell people who are currently suffering that God will make good of all this or that the present challenges will one day prove to have been formative. We will not rush to suggest that waiting, in and of itself, is an essential part of a balanced diet. We can say, however, that intentional waiting may be approached as a spiritual discipline that cultivates a more discerning state of mind. In the midst of intense situations, it is very hard to discern well. Complaint or complacency might come more naturally at those times, but they are no friend to discernment. To calm down and find more clearness, we seek practices that lead us away from desperation and toward a greater sense of gentleness with ourselves and our circumstances. Intentional waiting is not about avoiding or postponing an important decision but choosing to practice hope-filled attentiveness.

When I hear the stories of ministers who have finally come to a more discerning place with their own questions of calling, there appear to be some common themes. Most recount some kind of initial *slowing down*. Having been propelled at break-neck speed and having crashed into the question "Do I stay or do I go?" the Christian leader who responds, "I choose to wait," begins to interrupt the seemingly inevitable flow of events. Much like an encounter with limits, this slowing down can be accompanied by tears and tiredness, an early summons that leads her or him to demonstrate better attention to *self-care*. And what is usually born of that same moment

is a fresh dose of hopefulness related to a renewed *orientation toward God*. This is the point at which people describe learning to "hold things gently" as they become more watchful for signs that the Spirit is moving mightily in difficult situations, and as they become more confident that healing and transition are already underway, long before a decision is actually made. As I once heard Fr. Bob Sears, SJ, say during a retreat, "God wants you to be healed even more than you yourself want to be healed."[1] The invitation to wait is an opening for this healing to be accomplished. Although there is no set schedule, we can be sure that deep healing is seldom complete in a mere week or two. It is enough to trust, while we are waiting, that we will recognize the end of this time just as clearly as we realized its beginning.

From the first pages until now, we have carved out a holy space for those who might be trying to hold their lives and callings a bit more gently. Some ministers crossed a line of extreme frustration long ago and are left with the sense that all possibilities have been exhausted. Those ministers would have found reaching this late chapter exceedingly difficult. But for those who have some lingering sense of hope, however small, we have explored ways to stay engaged in ministry, at least until we can find our moorings and choose our leaving or our staying from a place of greater freedom and confidence in God's call. That is the purpose of waiting. Now, what are we to be doing in the meantime?

These chapters have served as a beginning in that they have explored practices for ministry that help us lean on God's grace in order to serve meaningfully and effectively over the long haul. Suggesting attributes gleaned from the timeless archetype of the eagle, we have explored fresh language and practical skills that enable us to recover our footing and submit anew to formation as Christ's disciples. First, to remain grounded in the moment, we *welcome the questions*, *reflect before responding*, and *choose our stories*. Next, to find our perches and engage purposeful conversation, we *learn our traditions*, *move toward clarity*, and *share our power*. And finally, when the call to adaptation and change asks us to soar in the midst of ambiguity, we *plan for flexibility*, *innovate to inspire*, and *befriend our limits*. These practices are interdependent, and when our confidence of calling is wavering, they invite us to return to our core passion

for relational ministry. Whatever our emotional and spiritual state, we are called to stay connected and minister with integrity, not only for our own sakes, but for the good of those we serve. In doing so we model, even if imperfectly, the ongoing process of discerning and living out baptismal vocation through the very real and often clumsy interactions of daily life.

The public nature of our roles always inclines us to "take the high road," but that commitment is all the more important during a time of waiting, especially if we have neared the end of our rope. What do we do when we are tired and others are watching? For one thing, we can look back again to Fr. Hensell's reminder that our role is to keep planting seeds. If we are wondering what God is calling us to do at any given time in our lives, the answer will always be "Plant seeds." To hold things gently is to stand in awe of God's presence and movement amidst so much we cannot fully understand. God has filled our bags with seeds, placed us in the field and set us about the task of planting. We have been gifted with the capacity to see possibilities, along with the freedom to cast our seeds generously upon any open places we find. When it is raining or muddy and the work is a slog, we are called to plant seeds just as earnestly as we do on the days when the sun is warm upon our backs. The call and the impulse of grace always persist. We keep casting seeds, which is no more and no less than an act of thanksgiving and praise. Casting seeds might also be considered the practice of hope.

Practiced Hope

Words like *gentle*, *open*, and *invitation* have been used purposefully here. They are like *hope* in that, while they do not always come naturally, we are still called to their exercise. These kinds of words point to a side of us that is vulnerable and too often hidden behind walls that have been erected one hurt at a time. Difficult circumstances once made it necessary to begin protecting our soft spots, hiding delicate emotions behind ones that make us feel, temporarily at least, more in control. Eventually protecting ourselves just became habit until we found ourselves persistently hard and defensive. Now, preparing to wait upon new possibilities and to ask what God might

have in store for the future, we need to recall that part of ourselves that has the softer capacities. It is the part that shelters lightness and freedom, and that peeks out on those occasions when we remember our love for the ministry to which we have been called and the people we encounter this day. Reconnecting with the softer part of ourselves helps us to carry on faithfully in the face of challenge, something that others have called "resilience." Unlike brute force or strength, resilience speaks through vulnerability toward flexibility, intentionality and our truest motivations, all of which help us carry on. The author Robert Wicks paints the picture vividly when he speaks of resilience as "bounce," but the concept is not new.[2] An old saying tells of a monk who was asked, "What is it that monks do?" The monk replied, "We fall down and we get up. We fall down and we get up again." To my ear that story is not about defeatism, but about living life in the full grace of God. When we fall down, something stirs in us to help us recognize even the slightest possibility of rising up again. When we become bored with getting up, or too weak, too exhausted, or too disheartened to do so alone, we see all the more clearly that we forever stand upon the grace of God.

Ministerial resilience is cultivated in rather concrete ways. The Twelve-Step program and Benedictine schools of spirituality both give us an example. JoAnn Campbell-Rice, a spiritual director and professional in the field of recovery, offers an insight that is as critical to those in ministry as it is to those fighting addictions: The lifelong call to vigilance is rooted in spiritual formation. "By the time someone picks up a drink," JoAnn observes, "we know that the real crisis is far behind us. It was a spiritual lapse long ago."[3] For those in ministry and recovery alike, we live painfully aware that any single stimulus or frustration can tip us over the edge. An active and maturing spiritual life, in all its varied facets of prayer, reflection, and community, acts as a buffer between an individual and the daily barrage of hurt. The human reality is that we are most vulnerable without regular prayer and reflection, without quiet time that grounds us in our fundamental reliance upon God and that nurtures our precious margin of freedom.

Similarly, the Benedictine tradition offers wisdom about the necessity of ongoing formation by emphasizing the place of *lectio divina*

within the monastic life. Benedict reserves two to three hours of a monk's day for the prayerful reading of Scripture and, although that may sound extreme to modern ears, we can appreciate his strong encouragement to become saturated with the Scriptures and formed to the likeness of Christ. Benedictines also pray daily in community, a rhythm that mightily undergirds the hours alone with God. The two go together. As I once heard a monk remark, "It was the Liturgy of the Hours that brought me to the monastery, but *lectio divina* that has kept me here." We need not become monastics to pray alone, to pray in community, or to submit to the long, slow process of formation. What is most important to the idea of holding things gently is the commitment to set ourselves before the Scriptures as a formative text and to recognize that through them God draws us back again and again over the course of our entire lives. God's fundamental desire to be in relationship and to shape our hearts and our lives through Scripture is accomplished in quiet, bit by bit.

Relational Conviction

We may have become so accustomed to being overwhelmed by difficulty and disappointment that submitting to any long and slow process sounds terribly impractical. Holding it gently might sound absurd when the demands of administration dominate our to-do lists or the intensity of our interactions continue to catch us off guard, yet all this is the proverbial rubber hitting the road. We are guaranteed no escape from the challenges of living and ministering within community, only the promise of God to sustain us within it. Returning to the example of Jesus' prayer for the disciples in John 17, we find there a promise fused with realism. "I do not ask that you take them out of the world" (v. 15), Jesus prays, stopping short of requesting that the disciples be relieved of their suffering. He prays only that they might be protected as they serve. Clearly Jesus has intentions that exceed any person's preferences for comfort and smooth sailing. Jesus also speaks mysteriously of sharing "my joy completely" (v. 13) even as he sends the disciples into a dangerous world. Holding these contradictions together makes room for joy to exist within difficulty.

Enduring ministry involves cultivating enough basic wellness to last a lifetime in Christian service. In that regard, "enduring" entails an element of survival. But even more, there is joy. Beyond survival, enduring ministry is about finding joy in participating in an old tradition of ministry. Our gifts, like those of the disciples, are being incorporated into the eternal mission of God, a mission that begins in Christ and flows through us into the world. Interestingly, Jesus concludes his prayer in John 17 by praying for the world in the same way he did for the disciples: that they may know the name of God, believe, and keep God's word; that they may be one; and that their joy, too, may be made complete. Jesus models the conviction that joy can be made complete, even if gnarled by difficulties, when it is rooted in the Risen Christ's ministry to others through us.

When we are on the ropes it can be hard to stay in relationship, but that is the essential difference between "surviving" and "thriving," to borrow a helpful distinction from *Resilient Ministry*.[4] A winter driving experience of mine uncomfortably illustrates the authors' point. As anyone in snow country knows, the trick to traffic signals in cold weather is adjusting your speed and avoiding a complete stop. Ice becomes especially slick at intersections and what little snow might have provided some traction is quickly peeled away by spinning tires. Those conditions are bad enough on flat ground, but that morning I was looking uphill at a stoplight where a large moving truck had stopped. Try as I might to keep slowly rolling, the gap narrowed between the truck and me until I had almost completely stopped, too, when the light finally turned green—at least I assumed the light had turned green because the truck's four rear tires had started spinning forward. And while those tires spun, the whole truck began to drift eerily back down the hill toward me. A glance in the rearview mirror showed another vehicle closing in behind me. In an instant I realized that the hood of my car was just short enough to slip under the truck's back bumper. I took the quick gamble that I could shoot under the truck's bumper and around it by accelerating and punching through a snow bank. Fortunately, I caught enough traction to make it, sparing barely enough momentum to spin my way through the icy intersection at the top of the hill. I was safe.

I would be proud to tell you that I stopped to help the truck driver and the car behind me, but I have to confess that I did not manage the adrenaline rush well enough for that possibility to have even crossed my mind. I had survived and that seemed immediately sufficient. Now, many seasons later, I have come to appreciate that I had other options. For example, I could have parked my car safely at the top of the hill and called for assistance, or I could have walked to the car below and advised him to back down the hill and give the truck some room. Either step would have leveraged my own wellbeing for the safety of others. Many years later, I have even more alternatives because I have learned to carry a shovel and traction blocks in an effort to be more proactive. I am more prepared to survive *and* thrive. Ministerial resilience is about the same thing. Survival is important, but it is not enough. We cannot simply steer clear of situations that make us weary or uncomfortable. If we can learn to hold things more gently and to foster some measure of discernment ourselves, we are called to share those blessings with others. The church needs people like you and me to stay the course and continue contributing our God-given gifts, as long as that calling remains genuine.

Nurtured Readiness

James continued to return monthly for spiritual direction after he had accepted God's invitation to enter a time of intentional waiting. He gradually began slowing down after letting go of a few commitments and adjusting his expectations about others. He focused on completing certain significant projects and recommitted to paying close attention to the relationships at the heart of his ministry. Six months later, James expressed a quiet and firm conviction that he was indeed being called to leave the parish. The outcome may not have fundamentally changed, but the tone surrounding his departure certainly did. Having waited and watched for a gentle clarity to emerge about the future of his calling, James had nurtured a hope-filled readiness. The next chapter in his ministry has yet to be written, but James will undertake that new work with fresh perspective and a more complete joy.

The reader may recall from the first chapter the legend about the rejuvenation of an eagle: "To rejuvenate itself, the eagle flies up to the region of the sun, which burns away the mist over its eyes and burns off its old feathers. The eagle then plunges three times into water, and its youth is restored."[5] Science refutes the proposition that eagles actually regenerate feathers in this way—or talons or beaks as other legends suggest—but that does not diminish the stirring power of the image. We, like Christians over the centuries, find hope in the assurance that renewal can come to the weary. That hope persists through discomfort as we fly higher, look directly to Christ and suffer the beautiful change that brings us to new life.

If this resource has helped you pause and reaffirm the connection between your life and the mission of God, then we might both be grateful. If some of the attributes of Christian leaders and practices for ministry have inspired you to turn with fresh perspective and renewed energy toward the people you serve, then your community of faith will surely be blessed. No reading or workshop can ever immunize us from difficulty or transition, but we have explored here the blessed space between the decision to stay or to leave. From here, you may be encouraged to remain in your position. If so, seek out ways to serve with even greater integrity. Then again, you may be called from one ministry to another, just as equally as God may call you to use your gifts outside of the church. If so, I pray that you may first find yourself in a new place spiritually. Then may the Spirit bless your transition to a new place physically. If the staying or the leaving is not yet clear, hold it all gently, confident that you are not alone and that the Lord is at work. Whatever your calling, this book is written so that you might live faithfully and well, toward a ministry that endures.

For Further Reflection . . .

1. What is it like for you to be waiting with God?
2. How do you choose to begin again?
3. If God brings the growth, what does it mean for you to keep planting seeds?

Notes

[1] Esther de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: An Introduction to Benedictine Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

[2] Robert Sears, SJ, "Personal Growth and Faith Development," (lecture, Franciscan Spirituality Center, La Crosse, WI, September 6, 2008).

[3] Robert J. Wicks, *Bounce: Living the Resilient Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4] JoAnn Cambell-Rice, "The Long Haul: Spiritual Health One Day at a Time" (lecture, Benedictine Center of St. Paul's Monastery, St. Paul, MN, January 23, 2014).

[5] Bob Burns, Tasha D. Chapman, and Donald C. Guthrie, *Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told Us about Surviving and Thriving* (Downers Grove, IN: InterVarsity, 2013), 14.

[6] David Badke, "Allegorical/Moral Meaning of the Eagle," *The Medieval Bestiary*, http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast232.htm. Used by permission.